

**REPRESENT!?: HIP-HOP AND THE SELF-AESTHETIC RELATION**

Christopher (Kip) Kline

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Doctoral Committee

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Phil Francis Carspecken, Ph.D.

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Barry Bull, Ph.D.

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Stephanie Carter, Ph.D.

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Luise McCarty, Ph.D.

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In loving memory of Kipchoge Neftali Kirkland

## **Acknowledgements**

I once heard Cornel West say in an interview that as a graduate student, “the books are your friends.” No doubt a wide range of books including major works of the American pragmatists, Habermas, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and others became companions of mine – none so close as West’s own work. Yet, while befriending books is a necessary experience for the PhD student, and certainly solitary reflection is an indispensable component of the life of a philosopher, I have enjoyed the flesh and blood friendship, support, and love of many through the process of this work.

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## Preface

As Murray Forman said in 2004, one hot minute with an Internet search engine can easily reveal the ever-increasing amount of hip-hop related undergraduate courses and graduate seminars in American colleges and universities.<sup>1</sup> The veritable mixtape of classes being offered on the subject spans the disciplines of African-American Studies, English, sociology, cultural studies, communications, and others. Conspicuously missing in Forman's own list of disciplines in which hip-hop is finding a home are philosophy and education. This is, in part, the argument of this preface, that hip-hop inquiry deserves a place in foundations or philosophy of education like Kanye deserved an American Music Award in '04 (which is to say, it is overwhelmingly deserved). I will make my own version of the "hip-hop belongs in academia" argument with a special emphasis on its rightful place in philosophy/educational foundations. First, however, it seems necessary to address my own connection with and participation in hip-hop culture. A white scholar writing about hip-hop could be accused of appropriating, co-opting; of being an opportunist, or a "wanksta." Richard Shusterman was aware of criticisms of this nature when he wrote the essay "The Fine Art of Rap," included in his *Pragmatist Aesthetics*. Schusterman's eloquent argument for why he, a white scholar, should find it appropriate to write about hip-hop is tucked away in a footnote. It is worth repeating in its entirety here.

As a white middle-class Jew, I realize that my interest in rap may be criticized as exploitative and not "politically correct," that I have no right to advocate or study a cultural form whose formative ghetto experience I lack. But though rap's roots lie firmly in the black urban ghetto, it aims (as we shall see) to reach a far wider audience; and its protest against poverty, persecution, and ethnic prejudice should be comprehensible to many groups and individuals who have experienced such things outside the black ghetto. In any case, I think it

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<sup>1</sup> Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, *That's the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

politically more incorrect to ignore rap's importance for contemporary culture and aesthetics by refusing to treat it simply because of race and socio-economic background.<sup>2</sup>

Hip-hop culture (including hip-hop scholarship)<sup>3</sup> has grown in complexity and sophistication since Schusterman's article, and the transracial possibilities with which hip-hop is currently brimming make his language feel a bit outdated, but the basic argument for folks outside the ghetto, even white scholars, taking an interest in hip-hop remains reasonable. However, while Schusterman's story, that of a white scholar who likes hip-hop, defends the legitimacy of its aesthetic sensibilities and finds it acceptable for white scholars to be writing on the subject, mine is a different story. My story is much less a defense of the appropriateness of a white scholar taking interest in a cultural phenomenon whose primary roots are in the experience of Black and Brown people and more about how I have found myself "thrown" (in the Heideggerian sense) into hip-hop and hip-hop scholarship, that is to say, it is much more personal than Schusterman's.

With that in mind, I have chosen to begin by telling that personal story about my journey to hip-hop as a white kid from a small city in Indiana. This autobiographical account is meant to depict my deeply felt connection with African-American people and culture (with an emphasis on various musical expressions) and how that connection led me into a deep and lasting romance with hip-hop.

### **Confronting Racist Roots**

My maternal great-grandfather was a Ku Klux Klan member. I never met him and only became aware of this fact through a story my grandmother told less than ten

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 321.

<sup>3</sup> Forman and Neal, *That's the Joint! : The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*.

years ago. As the story goes, my grandmother sat with her mother in what must have been a small country church, since everything in my grandmother's native southern Indiana town was small and country, and watched stoically as the Klan marched in. Though identities were shielded behind those cowardly white hoods, my grandmother's mother recognized her husband's shoes beyond doubt. My grandmother finished the story in her typical placating manner, asserting, "the Klan was about good things back then. If a man wasn't treating his wife right, they'd rough him up." I wondered aloud why a man would have to keep such an honorable membership a secret from his own wife if this were so (not to mention the blatant hypocrisy in the method of "correction"). Although hearing the truth of my ancestry from the lips of the lone living representative of that generation of my family fueled a kind of anger (embarrassment?) in me, it was by no means a complete surprise. As a teenager I had already sensed the racist roots of my maternal family tree and rebelled against it – once to the tune of declaring to my grandmother that between him and Abraham Lincoln, Malcolm X was the more heroic American. Given the story above, it is easy to imagine my grandmother's reaction.

And so it was that my felt connection with African-Americans and Black American culture in general became vivid against the backdrop of racism in my lineage. I suppose my assertion about Malcolm X and my subsequent reaction to my grandmother's story could be dismissed as some kind of sophomoric white liberal guilt. Indeed, guilt might accurately describe my emotional state at certain points in my quest to grapple with my own white privilege and broach honest conversations about race in America. Yet, I hope the story of my journey to hip-hop culture makes it difficult to dismiss my reactions with a phrase like "white liberal guilt."

## **Black Is Beautiful**

Growing up in a small northern Indiana city with only a handful of non-white residents, most of my early interactions with Black culture were through media. One of my first heroes was comedian, Eddie Murphy. As an elementary school-aged kid I couldn't get enough of his sketches on "Saturday Night Live." I mimicked his acts such as "Mr. Robinson's Neighborhood" (a ghettoized Mr. Rogers) and "James Brown's Celebrity Hot Tub." Far and away, my favorite SNL Eddie Murphy sketch involved Joe Piscopo and guest host, Stevie Wonder. The premise of the sketch is Eddie Murphy as the promoter of the "Miss Black Teenage America Contest" struggling to find a star act for entertainment. Joe Piscopo drags Stevie Wonder (portraying a nerdy Stevie Wonder imitator) into Eddie Murphy's office and tries to convince Murphy to hire "Alan, the Stevie Wonder Experience." Murphy is reluctant but agrees to hear "Alan's" act. When Stevie Wonder as "Alan" launches into a ridiculous, unrecognizable version of "Living for the City," Eddie Murphy, in reality known for his dead-on imitation of Stevie Wonder, responds by showing "Alan" how to "do" Stevie Wonder by singing a much more Stevie-sounding version of "My Cherie Amour." I was fond of mimicking this sketch and did so at a neighborhood friend's house one day. Upon hearing my Eddie Murphy version of "My Cherie Amour," my friend's dad came into the room and stared at me blankly for a moment. "You *really* sound like Stevie Wonder," he said. I was trying to sound like Eddie Murphy. But he was right.

That little nudge from my neighbor friend's father was all I needed to realize that my efforts that resulted in sounding like Stevie Wonder also meant that I really liked his music, and within months I was completely immersed in my emulation of his vocal

performances. Far from a kind of caricaturing, when I sang like Stevie Wonder, I was doing it out of an ever-increasing admiration. While we teetered on the edge of pubescence, my peers were buying cassette tapes of hair metal bands like Poison and Ratt as I spent countless hours in my bedroom with “Songs in the Key of Life.” I digested everything from “Fingertips Part II” to “Part-Time Lover” and along the way I inevitably encountered the larger corpus of Motown from the smooth harmonies and steps of the Temptations and Four Tops to the socially conscious vocal stylings of Marvin Gaye and a blockbuster act of five brothers whose hometown was just an hour or so up the road from my house. It wasn’t just the music that interested me. What started as an interest in Stevie Wonder’s music grew into biographical studies of the most prominent Motown artists and reading everything I could about Berry Gordy, Jr., and the history of Detroit’s most recognizable contribution to American music.

My immersion in all things Motown began to lead me to the brink of social issues that were not topics broached in my social studies class or at my family’s dining room table. Soon after the campaign to make Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday a national holiday finally succeeded, Stevie Wonder hosted a three-city television gala to celebrate the bill’s passing into law. I was, of course, glued to the television and even had the VCR cued to record the event for posterity. I was mostly interested in watching Stevie and other musical headliners perform, but the three hour show quickly came to be about much more than music as I was introduced to an all-star lineup of celebrity civil rights activists. Stevie Wonder introduced testimonials by Harry Belafonte, Dick Gregory, Cicely Tyson, Ben Vereen, Dionne Warwick, Bill Cosby, Debbie Allen, and others. Some of these were names I had scarcely heard of, yet their words moved me. Woven

through the live testimonials were video clips of Dr. King delivering speeches. I had heard of Martin Luther King well before that evening, but I had never actually *heard* him before. Even white kids from northern Indiana knew about “I Have a Dream,” but we were largely ignorant of the details and the delivery. I found myself wiping away tears as I got my first substantive glimpse into the civil rights struggle and the passionate and prophetic words of its harbinger. It was the first time in my life I had ever been so moved by words and ideas.

After that night I became more explicitly cognizant of my felt connection with African-American cultural products and social issues. I had precious little opportunity to be around Black folks, but when I was in the presence either of the two black families my parents had a relationship with, I would invariably soak up all they would tell me about their experiences, and I always wanted to have conversations about Black American music with them. I cherished these moments, but for the most part, my education came from the music.

By the time I was transitioning out of junior high and into high school, I already had a robust aesthetic appreciation not just for Motown and Stevie Wonder, but also for what we now call “classic soul” and gospel and R&B. At some point, though, it became about more than just the aesthetics, more than about loving the music and performing Stevie Wonder songs in school talent shows. It was inevitable. I had to know what “You Haven’t Done Nothin’” and “Master Blaster (Jammin’)” were about. It was Stevie Wonder who gave me my first accurate introduction to South African apartheid (“It’s Wrong”), and that eventually brought me to an understanding of the life and work of

Nelson Mandela, and the related insidious Reagan Administration policies. This was an education that I was not getting at school.

### **Eazy-E Goes to Football Camp**

My first hip-hop experiences were in the 1980s around my junior high/high school transition. Growing up in a predominantly white, small Midwestern city, I was completely ignorant of hip-hop's live East Coast beginnings with Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa in the 1970s that Tricia Rose (1994) and Jeff Chang (2005) have written so eloquently about. I had heard and fell in love with Herbie Hancock's "Rockit" in 1983 (which introduced me and a whole lot of other Midwesterners to "scratchin'") but hip-hop fully entered my world in 1985 in the form of the film, *Breakin'* and I instantly connected with the music and the breakdancing. My basement became my training ground for bustin' moves at the nearby dancehall that summer.<sup>4</sup> Just a minute after *Breakin'*, they paired 1970s rockers with hip-hop and made it more palatable for some white folks. But in 1986 I was less taken with "Walk This Way" than I was "Proud to Be Black," "My Adidas," and "You Be Illin,'" mostly because I perceived those tracks as expanding my Black culture vocabulary. My best friend and I made our own music videos to nearly all of the cuts from Run-DMC's *Raisin' Hell* and wrote little raps to reflect our own pubescent realities using "It's Tricky" and "Dumb Girls" as templates.

From 1985 to 1988 my musical experiences and taste continued to revolve around Motown and contemporary R&B with the addition of hip-hop. While Stevie Wonder was

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<sup>4</sup> While I don't think I ever gained real b-boy skills, I had enough moves to draw a crowd at the almost exclusively white teenage dance hall that was popular with kids from my the surrounding high schools. I recall one time dancing there when the lone Black person approached and "battled" me. I took it as a sign of respect even though I think he probably danced circles around me that night.

introducing me to political realities that my social studies teachers weren't, I was mostly aesthetically drawn to the music I was listening to, including my early experiences with hip-hop. There was, however, a kind of exposure to a new and unfamiliar world when I heard Run-DMC and saw them rock their Adidas with no shoelaces or when I sat in my room with headphones on imagining the "Bristol Hotel" listening to my cassette of LL Cool J ("The Bristol Hotel! Room 515. The Bristol Hotel! Where dat at? Jamaica, Queens!"). Without hip-hop, in no way would I have ever seen East Coast street styles or know about a place called Jamaica, Queens. These were not the typical kinds of acculturative lessons an Indiana teenager learned. My early high school years produced the Run-DMC and LL Cool J lessons. It was in 1989, though, that I got my real hip-hop education.

Involvement in athletics in high school afforded me the opportunity to be around students not from my school as I attended summer camps and played in tournaments away from home. This invariably exposed me to new things, often music. I heard N.W.A. (Niggaz with Attitude) for the first time at football camp. One of the campers in my dorm had a mixtape of West Coast rap. I had never heard of N.W.A. and didn't know much of anything about Compton, and I certainly hadn't been exposed to the kind of raw, in your face rebellion and misogyny that I heard from Eazy-E, Dr. Dre, Ice Cube and MC Ren. This was another tape I'd end up listening to through headphones. I knew my parents wouldn't understand or have sympathy for "Fuck tha Police." I was fascinated by the styles, language, and bravado, and I was sympathetic to "Fuck tha Police." It made me pay close attention to stories of racist police conduct even though I could never access such stories through my local news media. Though it was qualitatively different, I found



myself connecting to the anger against racist police practices in a way that reminded me of my affective response to my first real exposure to the speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X.

Later that year I purchased a cassette of music from Spike Lee's movie, *Do the Right Thing* (not to be confused with the original soundtrack which is comprised of Branford Marsalis jazz compositions). I had not yet seen the film, but I bought the tape because of the recognizable R&B and hip-hop artists featured. I remember the exact moment when I put the tape in my Walkman and heard Flavor Flav and Chuck D trading lines like (and also unlike) Michael and Jermaine in an old Jackson 5 vamp:

Awwwwwwww Nineteen eighty NINE!  
The number, another summer. Sound of the funky drummer.  
Music hittin' your heart 'cause I know you got 'sould' (brothers and sisters!) ...

Got to give us what we want  
Gotta give us what we need  
Our freedom of speech is freedom or death  
We got to fight the powers that be<sup>5</sup>

The power of Public Enemy's words motivated me to see my first Spike Lee Joint (again, small town Indiana was not a place one was likely to serendipitously catch *School Daze* (1988) or *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) even though they had been successful Spike Lee films prior to *Do the Right Thing*) and his classic tale of the hottest day of summer in Bed-Stuy was the most sophisticated and artistic statement on race in contemporary America that I had witnessed, by far. *Do the Right Thing* is a hip-hop film in that it features hip-hop in its soundtrack, a number of its characters are certainly hip-hop kids most notably, "Radio Raheem" played by young Bill Nunn, and it deals with issues that have been and continue to concern hip-hop culture. Without a doubt, Public Enemy's

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<sup>5</sup> Public Enemy "Fight the Power," from *Fear of a Black Planet*, Def Jam Records, 1990.

“Fight the Power” and Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* were seminal parts of my hip-hop education. Almost no one I knew had seen the movie. Very few of my peers were down with P.E.

### **Majority/Minority**

Some might describe my consumption of hip-hop as a kind of “cultural safari” in which I was able to peer into certain kinds of Black experience with the privilege of retreating back into my comfortable white world after an imaginative tour of the exotic street culture. No doubt I have so characterized some examples of white fascination with hip-hop. Yet, I felt a connection to Black music in a variety of forms before and after I came to hip-hop and that connection was more like a discovering of something that fit what was inside me and not as if I was looking through the glass at some exotic other.

My college years were spent at a predominantly white institution, but there were more Black folks there than at my high school, and my path crossed with most of them and I befriended many, mostly through performing. I had stopped playing football and concentrated on performing in college. I can’t remember a time when I wasn’t passionate about music and while I deeply felt hip-hop in the late 1980s, my performance skills were mostly concentrated in singing ability. My vocal style was crafted through countless hours of trying to emulate not just Stevie Wonder, but also Marvin Gaye, David Ruffin, Sam Cooke, and others. After a few performances on campus, I was asked to join the gospel choir. As a kind of “front man” for the gospel choir over the following three years, I built friendships with many Black students and faculty and was graciously embraced by the Black community on campus. I was invited to and extended a kind of

honorary membership in the Minority Student Organization as practically all of its members were friends of mine and I was certainly interested in the group's concerns. The director of the gospel choir took me under his wing and gave me individual instruction as well as offering a supportive friendship. My experience with the Black community on campus during my undergraduate years was by all means gracious and affirming but lest this part of the story begin to bear too much resemblance to the Pollyannish television version of Jim Gregory's time at Grambling, it is necessary to say that spending so much time in spaces where I was the lone white person did not happen without some anxiety and less than desirable consequences. Reflecting back, I wonder if my involvement in the Minority Student Organization was appropriate despite being invited by its members. It seems likely that there were grumblings that never reached my ears. My involvement in the gospel choir eventually got me kicked out of the university chorale, an auditioned choir that performed sacred and classical music. After hearing me perform many times in gospel style, the chorale director told me that I "could not sing [anymore]" and that I was "washed up." Also, there was the constant threat of being perceived as an appropriator or as being engaged in a kind of co-opting, and I thought it was certainly reasonable for Black folks on campus to hold this kind of doubt about my participation in certain groups. Yet, my central motivation to be around African-American people was to build friendships with those with whom I sensed shared interests. I am quite sure some people in the gospel choir and in the Minority Student Organization did not sense shared interest with me, but many did and extended friendships to me. For the first time in my life, I was experiencing friendships and identifying with groups that really shared my musical and sartorial style and taste, and as

these friendships and group identifications grew, I continued to learn and take to ways of communicating and interacting that were often distinct from my friendships with white folks and that in general felt more genuine.

One of these growing relationships was with my gospel choir director whom I will call “Marcus” here. Under Marcus’s tutelage, I learned to develop that Black gospel style that I discovered inside me the first time I heard a Sam Cooke record. Marcus and I ate a lot of soul food together and made a lot of music together. In that process, Marcus took me into a number of places where I was literally the only white person in the room. Most of these places were churches. Marcus knew almost all the music ministers in the Black churches in the city near my college and he took me to sing at many of them. I came to expect the looks of disbelief when it was announced to the congregations that I had come to sing, and I completely understood those who raised an eyebrow of suspicion at my appearance. But I also soon became familiar with the affirming responses of those who were feeling (read: appreciating) my performances (there’s no place a singer can go to get more immediate feedback than a Black church!). I was often greeted afterwards with complimentary messages like, “You sang!” and sometimes the compliments were laced with reminders of my whiteness, such as, “I don’t know what kind of burdens you bearin’ child, but you sure can sing!” I understood that kind of compliment. These folks kept it real.

Singing Black gospel music and spending so much time in social groups that were predominantly Black was, to a meaningful degree, constitutive of my identity in a way that has lasted well beyond those college years when I was hanging out with Marcus and

singing in all of his friends' churches. It was a salient part of discovering, developing, and acting on my felt connection to Black culture.

That connection was originally discovered through music. From Stevie Wonder, to the whole of Motown, to R&B and soul, to gospel, and to hip-hop, I found aesthetic sensibilities, styles in dress (I will never forget my man, Tony, a salesman in an urban-style clothing store at my local mall, without whom I would not have been nearly as fly during my high school days!), and socio-political ideas that resonated in ways quite distinct from any of my other life experiences. What started with trying to copy Eddie Murphy's Stevie Wonder imitation became a discovery of myself. "My Cherie Amour" opened my ears to a sound that had a prodigious effect on me and eventually brought me to "Village Ghetto Land," "Living for the City," and "Black Man," which opened my eyes to realities that had a profound influence and directed me toward a kind of education different from what I was receiving at school or home. I consider hip-hop to be a continuation of that education. Starting with the film, *Breakin'* and continuing with Run-DMC, Public Enemy, LL Cool J, and N.W.A. through headphones in my bedroom, I was introduced to a whole world that was connected to my education through Stevie Wonder, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, but was also new in important ways.

My hip-hop education that started in the 1980s is still happening today. Like Richard Shusterman, I am a white scholar who likes hip-hop and finds it an appropriate location for academic inquiry. Unlike Schusterman, I cannot stop there. My experience with hip-hop is tethered to a life of discovering a profound connection to Black culture and Black people. Music is constitutive of that connection. So, this white scholar finds it not only appropriate to write about hip-hop but imperative.

## **Hip-Hop and Philosophy of Education**

Murray Forman's list of current locations of the subdiscipline of "hip-hop studies" in university departments begins with the obvious African-American studies and includes American studies, cultural studies, communications and media studies, English, and sociology.<sup>6</sup> While there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that some hip-hop courses are being taught in schools of education, Forman's list is evidence that hip-hop studies has not carved out as much space in education as it has in a number of other academic disciplines. One purpose of this study is to assert the idea that one of hip-hop's most natural locations as a subdiscipline is, in fact, philosophy of education as it takes only a cursory examination of hip-hop culture to determine that a number of ideas of interest to those who study philosophy/education are coursing through it.

Most obviously, hip-hop culture is predicated on the efficient transfer of knowledge. The constant cultural innovations that are made in hip-hop (which, among other things, applies explicitly to vernacular and style) suggest that learning is a salient feature of the culture. In fact, to understand or participate in hip-hop culture, one must learn a whole lexicon that is driven by fluidity and innovation.

In addition to transferring knowledge with regard to a constantly changing lexicon, hip-hop culture provides deep insights into identity formation and development. Scholars of education are certainly interested in identity formation and hip-hop is an appropriate location of inquiry about identity. Indeed, hip-hop contributes a sophisticated scene of identity development as hip-hoppers are continually claiming identities and producing cultural innovations as they do so.

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<sup>6</sup> Forman and Neal, *That's the Joint! : The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*.

All of this suggests that hip-hop can be viewed as a pedagogical site and a fruitful area of inquiry for scholars of education. Further, there are philosophical insights that emanate from this pedagogical site, making hip-hop culture a copiously beneficial locus of study for philosophers of education.

In chapter one I explore the connection between hip-hop and philosophy/philosophy of education and argue that this is most fruitfully done through an examination of American pragmatism, specifically Cornel West's "prophetic pragmatism." I also take up Richard Shusterman's "pragmatist aesthetics" and his discussion of hip-hop/rap music. I add to Shusterman's aesthetic categories that he applies to hip-hop and I reveal the limitations of pragmatist aesthetics for inquiry into hip-hop culture.

Chapter two articulates the methodological orientation of the study. I call the approach "critical ethnographic philosophy," a kind of inquiry that uses critical qualitative research as a means to produce philosophical insights. It leans on insights from Habermas and Carspecken and it takes on Paul Willis's critical ethnography, *Learning to Labor* (1977) as a kind of template. This critical ethnographic philosophy is not only an effective way to "do philosophy" through critical qualitative research but it also provides a way to articulate the deep connection between philosophy and hip-hop through examination of the real artistic process as it happens "on the ground," and therefore, it fills in gaps in the emergent scholarship of hip-hop. Toward the end of the chapter I introduce the so-called underground hip-hop artists who serve as the subjects of the study.

The ethnographic portion of the study begins in chapter three where I begin reporting the results of the critical ethnographic analysis. That is to say, the remaining chapters examine and elucidate the philosophical insights that the data from the ethnography produced. With prophetic pragmatism as the philosophical underpinning, chapter three explores the nexus of identity and prophetism and identity and organic intellectualism as they are found in hip-hop artists of this study. Chapter four explores, in general, the spiritual ideas laced through all the subjects' experience in hip-hop culture. Specifically, it connects reformulated praxis theory, the "special status of the identity claim" (Carspecken 1999) and how this helps us understand spirituality and identity in hip-hop. Then, in chapter five, I use Richard Shusterman's "pragmatist aesthetics" (as discussed in chapter one) and reformulate it to include prophetism, thereby turning it into prophetic pragmatist aesthetics. I also add to Shusterman's categories, kinetic consumption. I then explore the relationship between the aesthetics and constructions of the self.



Christopher (Kip) Kline

REPRESENT!: HIP-HOP AND THE SELF-AESTHETIC RELATION

Hip-hop culture has been consistently marginalized, to a significant extent vilified, in dominant cultural discourse. At the same time, it continues to increase its prodigious influence over youth culture, broadly speaking. This study claims that inflamed rhetoric about hip-hop culture is based on misinformation and shortsighted notions and therefore seeks to make inquiry into the culture in such a way as to oppose the mainstream conversation about hip-hop with more complete and authentic understandings. In so doing, it seeks to practice philosophy through the use of critical ethnography. This method is rooted in Paul Willis's *Learning to Labor* (1977), a critical ethnographic study that articulated philosophical ideas, albeit implicitly.

The study makes use of philosophy and critical ethnography in two ways. One, it uncovers the deep connections between philosophy and hip-hop culture, at least as philosophy is recast in Cornel West's project of "prophetic pragmatism." Two, it uses ethnography of local, so-called underground hip-hop artists in Chicago to address, more overtly than Willis, philosophical questions about the construction and maintenance of a self, specifically how the self is constructed and maintained through hip-hop aesthetics.

This philosophical and ethnographic examination of hip-hop culture has yielded important insights with regard identity formation, organic intellectualism, praxis theory, and spirituality and how these notions interact with hip-hop's particular aesthetic sensibilities. It is of interest to all theorists with an interest in identity, urban youth culture, and education.

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## Chapter One

### Hip-Hop and Prophetic Pragmatism: Practicing Philosophy in the Streets

I think that philosophy is still rude and elementary. It will one day be taught by poets.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

My own feeling is that the idea of the Hip-Hop Generation brings together time and race, place and polyculturalism, hot beats and hybridity. It describes the turn from politics to culture, the process of entropy and reconstruction. It captures the collective hopes and nightmares, ambitions and failures of those who would otherwise be described as “post-this” or “post-that.”

So, you ask, when does the Hip-Hop Generation begin? After DJ Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa. Whom does it include? Anyone who is down. When does it end? When the next generation tells us it’s over.

Jeff Chang

Philosophy belongs in the streets. Or so says William James.<sup>1</sup> And KRS-ONE.<sup>2</sup>

In so far as it is concerned with confronting the human condition “on the ground,” philosophy has a multifarious connection with hip-hop culture, a connection that has reached some level of legitimacy in the academy if we take as evidence a book on the subject co-edited by a Harvard professor.<sup>3</sup> In general, this *philo-sophia* can be found at every stage of the hip-hop generation’s proliferation from the earliest trenchant pronouncements of Afrika Bambaataa’s “Zulu Nation” to the so-called “Golden Age” of hip-hop when Chuck D and Public Enemy sketched the template for socio-politically conscious rap. When hip-hop culture continued to grow in sophistication and manifestation in the 1990s, adding spoken word poetry to its growing list of expressions, the love of wisdom expanded along with it, bound up in vocal packages of wit and

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<sup>1</sup> Derrick Darby and Tommie Shelby, *Hip Hop and Philosophy : Rhyme 2 Reason, Popular Culture and Philosophy* ; V. 16 (Chicago: Open Court, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> See especially the “Urban Inspirational Metaphysics” chapter in K. R. S. One and Tavis Smiley, *Ruminations*, 1st ed. (New York: Welcome Rain Publishers, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Tommie Shelby, co-editor of the earlier footnoted, *Hip Hop and Philosophy* (2005) is John L. Loeb Associate Professor of the Social Sciences at Harvard University.

witness, incisiveness and irony, satire and syncopation, all *a cappella* style. More recently, hip-hop culture's *philo-sophia* can be witnessed in its internal critiques by Saul Williams, Dead Prez, Sarah Jones, and others, along with so-called underground scenes that tell the stories of the local realities of Sly Stone's "Everyday People." Growing is the number of panel discussions, conferences, book and poetry readings, group discussions on hip-hop, inside *and* outside of the academy, while the number of university courses with previously implausible titles that include "Tupac," "rap," "hip-hop," or "hip-hop culture" is expanding in a variety of academic disciplines. Discursive pursuit of wisdom is not hip-hop culture's only manifestation of a connection with philosophy. The plurality in hip-hop's expressive idioms (from its early days, MCing, DJing, breakdancing, and graffiti art were all constitutive of "hip-hop") reveals a collage of performative action that unveils insight into the self-aesthetic relation through repetition and representation, *techne*, and technology.

I am not suggesting that the American popular art form known as hip-hop is, in effect, identical to the American academic philosophy in which John Dewey was among the first to receive a PhD at Johns Hopkins University. However, it is reasonable to characterize hip-hop culture as being animated, in large part, by *philo-sophia*. Further, American pragmatists like Dewey sought to *reconceptualize* philosophy as cultural criticism and production, or put another way, to take it to the streets. Cornel West takes up this reconceptualization in his prophetic pragmatism. It is this specific brand of neopragmatism that can best serve as the underpinning for examining hip-hop culture. This chapter examines prophetic pragmatism by mining the roots of both its pragmatism and prophetism and then it will consider hip-hop culture through the lens of prophetic

pragmatism, its origins and trajectory, some seminal figures and events, the emerging corpus of hip-hop scholarship including Richard Shusterman's work of applying his pragmatist aesthetics to rap.

## **Prophetic Pragmatism**

Cornel West's *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (1989) is arguably less a genealogy and more a quilting of handpicked American ideas that culminate in West's own prophetic pragmatism. In fact, West admits his text is "a social history of ideas" that

does not purport to be a comprehensive account of American pragmatism. Rather, it is a highly selective interpretation of American pragmatism in light of the present state (or my reading) of American society and culture.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* is West's articulation of his brand of neopragmatism, which is rooted in the ideas of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and (especially) John Dewey, highly influenced by Emersonian transcendentalism and Gramscian Marxism, and rounded out by the realist social critiques of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and the international perspective of W.E.B. Du Bois. Prophetic pragmatism is primarily a political project that employs the pragmatist evasion of epistemology-centered philosophy as it attempts to reconceptualize philosophy as a form of cultural criticism and a call to social action.

It is generally accepted that pragmatism, both historically and in its more contemporary iterations, resists strict definitional parameters.<sup>5</sup> Yet, scholars of

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<sup>4</sup> Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 6.

<sup>5</sup> See especially Richard J. Bernstein, "American pragmatism: the conflict of narratives." In Herman Saatkamp (ed.), *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995).

pragmatism are generally agreed upon a number of its core themes, and West's prophetic pragmatism clearly draws on the most widely accepted motifs of antifoundationalism, thoroughgoing fallibilism, the social nature of the self and the necessity of a community of inquirers, radical contingency, and plurality.<sup>6</sup> While prophetic pragmatism acknowledges and adopts these general themes, it is set apart from other manifestations of neopragmatism in its highlighting of Perice's agapism while criticizing his veneration of scientific method, its critique of James's individualism and gradualism, and its prizing Deweyan creative democracy and critical intelligence while claiming that Dewey's project was truncated due to his avoidance of real professional risk. But more than anything else, prophetic pragmatism separates itself from other forms of neopragmatism by its inclusion of DuBois, Niebuhr, and Gramsci, names that do not frequently appear in retellings of the tradition of pragmatism. But, as Alasdair MacIntyre has said of tradition, "[it] not only embodies the narrative of an argument, but is only recovered by an argumentative retelling of that narrative which will itself be in conflict with other argumentative retellings."<sup>7</sup>

### **The Pragmatist Roots in Prophetic Pragmatism**

The philosophical base of prophetic pragmatism begins with an exploration of Emerson. This is an apt starting point for West's project and the title of the opening chapter of the text suggests Emersonian ideas as a "prehistory" to American pragmatism. West also claims there is a discernable moral and political continuity between Emerson

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<sup>6</sup> This particular articulation of pragmatism's main themes leans on Richard J. Bernstein, "Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Healing of Wounds," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 63, No. 3. (Nov., 1989), 5-18.

<sup>7</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crisis, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science," *Monist* 60 (1977), 461.

and Dewey.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* emphasizes Emersonian provocation. In fact, West says the “primary aim of Emerson’s life and discourse is to *provoke*.”<sup>9</sup> (emphasis added) He locates this provocation in Emerson’s moral critiques of market culture. West discusses Emerson as an organic intellectual, which becomes important as prophetic pragmatism is a call to social action and as such seeks to speak, in addition to the specialized language of the academy, the language of the grassroots.<sup>10</sup>

West finds that Emerson “not only prefigures the dominant themes of American pragmatism but ... enacts an intellectual style of cultural criticism that permits and encourages American pragmatists to swerve from mainstream European philosophy.”<sup>11</sup> These dominant Emersonian themes that contribute to West’s project include theodicy, moralism, and an emphasis on human agency. Perhaps more important than these specific themes that come to influence prophetic pragmatism is Emerson’s adumbration of American pragmatism through the general critique of epistemology-centered philosophy. Though Emerson was criticized for a lack of method and denigrated by some critics as a mere writer of aphorisms, he was, at least in one particular case, defended as a philosopher and lauded for his critique of philosophy. John Dewey was so taken with Emerson’s attempt to recast philosophy that, according to Cornel West, in an essay on Emerson<sup>12</sup>, “his [Dewey’s] typical bland sentences become lively sparks of expression; his glib formulations, vivacious evocations; his flat logical constructions,

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<sup>8</sup> Rosemary Cowan, *Cornel West: The Politics of Redemption*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 39.

<sup>9</sup> Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy : A Genealogy of Pragmatism, The Wisconsin Project on American Writers* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989)., 25.

<sup>10</sup> Rosemary Cowan, *Cornel West: The Politics of Redemption*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 44.

<sup>11</sup> West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy : A Genealogy of Pragmatism.*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> John Dewey, “Emerson – The Philosopher of Democracy,” in *The Collected Works of John Dewey (1882-1953)*, electronic version, (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press).



dancing, staccato metaphors and tropes.”<sup>13</sup> It was Emerson’s imprint on him that provided the impetus for Dewey’s reconceptualization of philosophy, as we shall see below.

After this Emersonian “prehistory” Charles Sanders Peirce and William James provide the “historical emergence of American pragmatism.” West de-emphasizes Peirce’s mathematical logic and semiotics in favor of his more speculative ideas on ethics, politics, and religion and indeed claims that *from Peirce’s own perspective*, the more technical side is “inseparable from his more speculative views.”<sup>14</sup> The text emphasizes Peirce’s version of “evolutionary love” or agapism, the idea that social evolution is not powered by a Darwinian mechanical necessity nor what he refers to as “the Gospel of Greed,” rather, the confluence of mechanical necessity with chance and most important, love, by which Peirce means “the ardent impulse to fulfil another’s highest impulse” as exemplified by Jesus Christ of the Christian gospels.<sup>15</sup>

West’s highlighting of Peirce’s agapism operates as a precursor to his own iteration of pragmatism that contains a prophetic component, which is discussed below. But this emphasis also uncovers a question about the coexistence of contingency and revisability with regard to scientific inquiry and tradition and dogma with regard to ethics and religion that must be resolved in interpreting Peirce’s pragmatism. “The Fixation of Belief” (1877) and “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” (1878) were the first two essays in a six-part series published by Peirce in *The Popular Science Monthly*. In them, we find what William James later called “the principle of Peirce” or the principle of scientific

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<sup>13</sup> West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*, 72.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, from “Evolutionary Love.” In Louis Menand (ed.), *Pragmatism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 52.

inquiry. In short, these essays begin articulating the ideas of American pragmatism that James would soon popularize.<sup>16</sup> The principle of scientific inquiry that Peirce offered as the preferred means of “fixing” our belief was a direct criticism of the act of satisfying the “irritation of doubt” by clinging to the most readily available beliefs that are arrived at through expedience, appeals to authority, or *a priori* reasoning, the indubitability of which Peirce continually rebelled against.<sup>17</sup>

Alongside Peirce’s commitment to scientific method is an equal commitment to contingency and revisability that portrays the convergence of the scientific community on the real as a regulative ideal that is never reached, and therefore we are to accept the best available version, subject to revision.<sup>18</sup> How do we reconcile this championing of openness and revision in scientific inquiry with the commitment to tradition and dogma in religion and ethics found in Peirce’s agapism? West answers this question with a biographical account of the context in which Peirce’s ideas sprout. While, on the one hand, Peirce is a true “fearless intellectual pioneer” committed to the life of the mind and is drawn in by the possibilities of scientific inquiry including its revisability and contingency, on the other hand, he does not enjoy the successful academic life of his peer, William James -- quite the contrary. Peirce came face-to-face with human crises in modern America, including homelessness and loneliness. He was quite troubled by the ill effects of industrialization and professional specialization. These modern American troubles become the breeding ground for Peirce’s inclusion of ideas about love and community in his pragmatic thought. West concludes,

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<sup>16</sup> See *Pragmatism*, ed. Louis Menand (New York: Vintage Books, 1997) and Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

<sup>17</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief,” in *Pragmatism*, ed. Louis Menand (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 7-25.

<sup>18</sup> West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*, 51.

Given this context, his personal temperament, and his burning intellectual vocation, Peirce embraces the Episcopal church, castigates the individualism, professionalism, and Americanism of his day, and thoroughly devotes himself to the life of the mind and the ideas of community and love.<sup>19</sup>

The explanation of Peirce's ostensive paradox does not end with this description of his response to industrialization, professionalization, and other modern American social ills. There is an explanation offered by Peirce himself in a footnote added in 1893 to his discussion of transubstantiation in "How to Make Our Ideas Clear." Peirce uses the Catholic/Protestant debate over the Eucharist as an illustration of the importance of effects in the process of "fixing" our beliefs.

It is foolish for Catholics and Protestants to fancy themselves in disagreement about the elements of the sacrament, if they agree in regard to all their sensible effects, here and hereafter.

It appears, then, that the rule for attaining this third grade of clearness of apprehension is as follows: Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole conception of the object.<sup>20</sup>

This passage, especially the second paragraph, is a hallmark of early pragmatist thought, but it is the subsequently added footnote that lends explanation to Peirce's simultaneous commitment to revision in science and tradition in religion.

Before we undertake to apply this rule, let us reflect a little upon what it implies. It has been said to be a sceptical and materialistic principle. But it is only an application of the sole principle logic which was recommended by Jesus; "Ye may know them by their fruits," and it is very intimately allied with the ideas of the gospel. We must certainly guard ourselves against understanding this rule in too individualistic a sense. To say that man accomplishes nothing but that to which his endeavors are directed would be a cruel condemnation of the great bulk of mankind, who never have leisure to labor for anything but the necessities of life for themselves and their families. But, without directly striving for it, far less comprehending it, they perform all that civilization requires, and bring forth another generation to advance history another step. Their fruit, therefore, collective; it is the achievement of the whole people ...<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief," in *Pragmatism*, ed. Louis Menand (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 36.

<sup>21</sup> West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*, 50.

Here we see that the pragmatic emphasis on effects is derived by Peirce from the “logic of Jesus” and his underscoring of community is related to the Christian gospel. This means that his agapism is not the only part of his pragmatism that draws on religious tradition. Yet Peirce is aware that drawing on the principles of Jesus in order to criticize Darwinism would seem inconsistent to his colleagues as he claims in “Evolutionary Love” that “Such a confession will probably shock my scientific brethren.”<sup>22</sup> West concludes that Peirce’s weaving together of Christian tradition and contingency in science is, in fact, what breeds American pragmatism.

Peirce’s double consciousness of experimental inquiry and common human sentiments and his dual allegiance to scientific method and Christian faith serve as the soil upon which the seeds of American pragmatism sprout.<sup>23</sup>

It is arguable whether or not Peirce’s “dual allegiance to scientific method and Christian faith” was the breeding ground for American pragmatism, especially considering that Dewey, described by West as “The Coming-of-Age of American Pragmatism,”<sup>24</sup> exchanged Christian faith for “A Common Faith” at the height of the articulation of his pragmatism.<sup>25</sup> But it is clear that this kind of dual commitment forms the foundation of *West’s* pragmatism. West is fond of Peirce’s pragmatism because his agapism is congruent with West’s own commitment to prophetic Christianity and, like Peirce, West’s Christian commitment is coupled with a pragmatic dedication to revisability and contingency and Emersonian evasion of epistemology-centered philosophy.

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<sup>22</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, from “Evolutionary Love” in *Pragmatism*, ed. Louis Menand (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 55.

<sup>23</sup> West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy : A Genealogy of Pragmatism*. 49.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> See John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Steven C. Rockefeller, *John Dewey : Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

James figures into West's work as the

exemplary Emersonian embodiment of intellectual power, provocation, and personality. He is first and foremost a moralist obsessed with heroic energies and reconciliatory strategies for individuals.<sup>26</sup>

James is important for West because his professional success allowed him to become pragmatism's popularizer (a role not available to Peirce due to his professional failures) and champion of the evasion of epistemology-centered philosophy. Yet James's pragmatism diverges from Peirce in that James's emphasis is on individual heroic energies as opposed to Peirce's commitment to the communal. Also, while "Peirce applies Emersonian themes of contingency and revisability to the scientific method, James extends them to our personal and moral lives."<sup>27</sup> With regard to the latter difference, it is clear that West prefers James as he claims in a book published prior to *American Evasion* that one of the "major shortcomings" of American pragmatism is its "veneration of scientific method and the practices of the scientific community."<sup>28</sup> However, West aligns himself with Peirce in the former difference as we shall see from his emphasis on the social in Dewey.

West is critical of James's ideological centrism and gradualism. He says that James "always ends by residing in the golden mean, between two extremes."<sup>29</sup> This is expressed in James's rhetorical strategy of juxtaposing polar positions and attempting to collapse the differences by taking the best of both and doing away with whatever is leftover. Yet, West points out that James's "middle-of-the-roadism" relies on the

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<sup>26</sup> West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*, 54.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>28</sup> Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! : An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982).

<sup>29</sup> West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*.

assumptions that reconciliation between two extremes is possible, that the compromise can be genial, and that such a genial compromise would be better than either extreme.<sup>30</sup>

It is in James's pragmatic conception of truth that we find evidence of his gradualism. West certainly adopts for his own prophetic pragmatism the Jamesian notion of open-endedness with regard to truth, the notion that the universe is incomplete. West aligns himself with the notion of truth articulated in James's *Pragmatism*.

Truth happens to an idea, it becomes true, is made true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its verification. Its validity is the process of its valid-ation.<sup>31</sup>

With this much, West is in agreement. However, it is James's emphasis on continuity with regard to truth that West does not adopt. James claims that a new idea

preserves the older stock of truths with a minimum of modification, stretching them just enough to make them admit the novelty, but conceiving that in ways as familiar as the case leaves possible. An outrée explanation, violating all our preconceptions, would never pass for a true account of a novelty. We should scratch round industriously till we found something less eccentric. The most violent revolutions in an individual's beliefs leaves most of his old order standing. New truth is always a go-between, a smoother-over of transitions. It marries old opinion to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity.<sup>32</sup>

It becomes clear in *American Evasion* that this fixation on continuity is not attractive for West. It renders James politically impotent, and although he is as daring as Peirce by introducing revisability and contingency into his theory of truth, James's gradualism leaves a bit of a sour taste in West's mouth. "Of course, new knowledge and truths must build on the old, but James's preoccupation with continuity minimizes disruption and precludes subversion," West claims.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>31</sup> William James, *Pragmatism* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1991).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 29, 30.

<sup>33</sup> West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy : A Genealogy of Pragmatism*.

This criticism is akin to another shortcoming West finds in James's pragmatism, that is, that it is stuck in a kind of bourgeois panorama that prohibited James from seeing, and perhaps more importantly, addressing social ills that did not immediately bump up against his own middle class. Put succinctly, West says, "James is no radical or revolutionary"<sup>34</sup> and tells he tells us that this is due, in part, to James's middle class experiences.

James's position is symptomatic of his class background, family upbringing, and personal temperament. The crises he encountered were personal and existential, not political and economic ... Therefore, James was preoccupied with the state of his and others' souls, not the social conditions of their lives.<sup>35</sup>

So, West applauds James as American pragmatism's popularizer and credits him for following Peirce in his radical incorporation of revision and contingency in his theory of even though West points out the limitations of his individualism and gradualism. It is curious, though, that West does not mention one of James's most well known essays, "The Will to Believe." It is not simply the fact that the essay is among the most salient in James's corpus that makes the omission noteworthy, since we have already established that West admits that his selections in *American Evasion* are handpicked for his purposes, rather, it is because it is easy to find traces of James's argument in "The Will to Believe" sprinkled around the very foundations of prophetic pragmatism.

"The Will to Believe" is James's articulation and defense of fideism and a direct response to the intellectual caution of William Clifford.<sup>36</sup> James constructs the "genuine option" that permits assent to a belief through our "passional nature" in the absence of intellectual grounds that Clifford requires for any belief. James argues that in the absence

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> William James, "The Will to Believe" in *Pragmatism*, ed. Louis Menand (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 74.

of such intellectual grounds, our will or “passional nature” may be invoked, provided the choice is “living” as opposed to “dead,” meaning that there is some level of appeal to the would-be believer, the choice is “forced” as opposed to “avoidable,” and it is “momentous” rather than “trivial.”<sup>37</sup> Of course, for James, religious belief constitutes such a “genuine option,” and not too dissimilar from “Pascal’s Wager” is James’s conclusion that a bit of intellectual courage is called for in such matters. The absence of “The Will to Believe” in *American Evasion* is perplexing because, to my reading, prophetic pragmatism clearly draws on the fideism James expresses in his essay.

Aptly, John Dewey is given a prominent place in the retelling of the narrative of American pragmatism in *American Evasion* as West labels Dewey “The Coming-of-Age of American Pragmatism” (in fact, he is fond enough of Dewey to call him “the American Hegel and Marx!”<sup>38</sup>). West finds in Dewey a corrective to James’s individualism. Additionally, Dewey’s social and political engagement taken together with what West considers to be a prodigious moral dimension in Dewey becomes a template for prophetic pragmatism (though West is also critical of Dewey as we shall see below).<sup>39</sup> The level to which Dewey valued democracy is especially attractive for West’s program. Hilary Putnam claims that West finds in Dewey not just an emphasis on the value of democracy that is congruent with West’s own but also a sense of the vigilance that real democracy requires.

[L]ike West, Dewey valued democracy while refusing to shut his eyes to the distance we have to travel if we are to achieve real democracy. For real democracy, Dewey consistently taught, is not just a matter of counting votes; it is the ideal of real participation in the decision-making process by those affected by the decisions to be made, and it requires a new kind of education, a new way

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 70.

<sup>38</sup> West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy : A Genealogy of Pragmatism*, 69.

<sup>39</sup> Rosemary Cowan, *Cornel West: The Politics of Redemption*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 41.



of applying intelligence to social problems, and what he called a “democratic faith,” an attitude toward individuals that manifests itself in all of one’s personal relations and not just in “public life.”<sup>40</sup>

More pages are dedicated to Dewey in *American Evasion* than to any other thinker, and it is clear that this is due, at least in part, to the signal West takes from Dewey about epistemology-evasive philosophy. West claims that

John Dewey is the culmination of the tradition of American pragmatism. After him, to be a pragmatist is to be a social critic, literary critic, or a poet – in short, a participant in cultural criticism and cultural creation. This does not mean that Dewey provides panaceas for philosophical problems or solutions to societal crises. Rather, Dewey helps us see the complex and mediated ways in which philosophical problems are linked to societal crises.<sup>41</sup>

This passage probably says as much about West’s pragmatism as it does Dewey’s. West sees Dewey’s metaphilosophy as serving the end of reconceptualizing philosophy into an activity bound up with cultural production and criticism. Prophetic pragmatism clearly operates with this reconceptualization, and more will be said about this below.

West’s retelling of Dewey’s place in the narrative of American pragmatism begins with an exploration of Dewey’s reading of Emerson. The reconceptualization of philosophy that West finds in Dewey clearly has its roots in Dewey’s response to Emerson. In his essay, “Emerson – The Philosopher of Democracy,” Dewey’s tone reaches a rare crescendo in his defense of Emerson’s status as philosopher. After noting the “condescending patronage” of Emerson by literary critics, Dewey asserts, “Perhaps those are nearer right, however, who deny that Emerson is a philosopher, because he is more than a philosopher.”<sup>42</sup> Dewey begins his defense of Emerson by articulating the critique leveled against him for lack of coherent method, reducing him, in the eyes of the

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<sup>40</sup> Hilary Putnam, “Pragmatism Resurgent,” *Cornel West: A Critical Reader*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 24.

<sup>41</sup> West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy : A Genealogy of Pragmatism*.

<sup>42</sup> *The Collected Works of John Dewey (1882-1953)*, electronic version, (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press), mw.3.185.

critic, to a mere “writer of maxims and proverbs.”<sup>43</sup> The response to such characterizations is rather excessive but it is telling with regard to Dewey’s metaphilosophical aims.

I am not acquainted with any writer, no matter how assured his position in treatises upon the history of philosophy, whose movement of thought is more compact and unified, nor one who combines more adequately diversity of intellectual attack with concentration of form and effect.<sup>44</sup>

West knows Dewey’s characterization of Emerson is overstated, but the point, ultimately for prophetic pragmatism, is that Dewey’s pragmatism takes seriously the Emersonian evasion of epistemology-centered philosophy and in so doing recasts philosophy as an activity bound up with human activity, “on the ground.” Emerson is not merely a writer of aphorisms, but systematic theoretician whose method happens to be tethered not to *a priori* foundations, but to dynamic human activity.

This reading and defense of Emerson and the subsequent refashioning of philosophy has its first mature expression in Dewey’s “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy” (1917). Here Dewey begins by “bemoaning the fact that the cloistered and conservative character of modern philosophy has produced a cultural situation in which ‘direct preoccupation with contemporary difficulties is left to literature and politics.’”<sup>45</sup> This essay is Dewey’s sophisticated articulation of his aim to “evade the epistemological problematic of modern philosophy and thereby emancipate philosophy from its arid scholasticism and cultural conservatism.”<sup>46</sup>

In addition to the Emersonian influence, Dewey’s metaphilosophy emphasizes the role of critical intelligence in human affairs. This critical intelligence, for Dewey, is

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, mw.3.184.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy : A Genealogy of Pragmatism*, 87.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 88.

simply the application of the scientific attitude to human problems. Dewey makes a distinction between the scientific attitude and scientific method. Critical intelligence distances itself from dogmatism by operating with a kind of epistemological pluralism. It is not the sole property of scientific method. Its aims are to solve human problems and realize potentialities. West highlights two points with regard to Dewey and critical intelligence. First, he notes that “critical intelligence is available to all peoples; it is neither the birthright of the highbrow nor the property of the professional.”<sup>47</sup> Second, although critical intelligence makes good use of scientific method, “the results of science do not constitute disclosure of the real.”<sup>48</sup> For West’s prophetic pragmatism, Dewey’s metaphilosophy is paramount. Prophetic pragmatism takes up Dewey’s Emersonian recasting of philosophy in America and the emphasis on critical intelligence as a means of avoiding dogmatism with regard to scientific method.

With this foundation, it is possible to next examine how prophetic pragmatism specifically employs a critical evaluation of Emerson, Peirce, James, and Dewey, and also how it makes use of Gramsci, Du Bois, and Niebuhr.

Clearly, West is drawn to antifoundationalism in Emerson. He also makes use of Emerson’s idea that human beings have “Promethean possibilities.” He describes Emerson’s contribution to prophetic pragmatism as:

themes of the centrality of the self’s morally laden transformative vocation; the necessity of experimentation to achieve the self’s aims of self-mastery and kinship with nature; and, the important self-creation and self-authorization.<sup>49</sup>

Yet, West also says that these impulses need to be reworked with a Deweyan conception of creative democracy and Du Bois’s critiques of capitalist democracy. It is this political

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 97.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 216.

potency that West finds missing in pragmatism's "prehistory" (Emerson) and in its historical emergence (Peirce and James). However, for West, Dewey remained too tied to "the professional and reformist elements of the middle class" that was "seduced by two strong waves of thought and action; managerial ideologies of corporate liberalism and bureaucratic control, and Marxist ideologies of class struggle."<sup>50</sup> In the end, West claims that Dewey's project "never really got off the ground" for these reasons. As Putnam puts it, "[West's] criticism is that Dewey called for social change from below, but did not, in fact, pay any real attention to that 'below,' to mass movements and political developments outside of the white American middle class."<sup>51</sup>

W.E.B. Du Bois provides prophetic pragmatism with the impulse to move beyond these Deweyan limitations. In fact, West claims that Du Bois offers American pragmatism "what it sorely lacks," namely, an international perspective and alignment with the plight of the "wretched of the earth." Du Bois acknowledged hurdles to Emersonian radical democracy that Peirce, James, and Dewey did not. West claims that Du Bois was influenced by American pragmatism, but by virtue of being an intellectual of African descent, he viewed America through different lenses than Peirce, James, and Dewey. According to West, Du Bois' work,

illustrates the blindness and silences in American pragmatist reflections on individuality and democracy. Although none of the pragmatists were fervent racists themselves – and most of them took public stands against racist practices – not one viewed racism as contributing greatly to the impediments for both individuality and democracy.<sup>52</sup>

The attraction to pragmatism, for Du Bois, was largely animated by his sense of its relevance for the plight of African Americans found in the Emersonian evasion of

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 107.

<sup>51</sup> Hilary Putnam, "Pragmatism Resurgent," *Cornel West: A Critical Reader*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 34.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 146, 7.

epistemology-centered philosophy.<sup>53</sup> Du Bois, like Peirce, rebelled against *a priori* reasoning, though, for different reasons. Du Bois claims, in his magnum opus, *The Souls of Black Folk*, that, “most Americans answer all queries regarding the Negro *a priori*, and the least that human courtesy can do is listen to evidence.”<sup>54</sup> Here, Du Bois sees the privileging of *a priori* reasoning as a tool of oppression, the antidote for which is pragmatism. This, then, leads to Du Bois’s contribution to the prophetic pragmatist *ethos*, that is to say, application of evasion of epistemology-centered philosophy to the plight of the wretched of the earth.

Antonio Gramsci, not unlike Du Bois, covers what prophetic pragmatism sees as a blind spot in American pragmatism. Gramsci, like West after him, saw the need to bring political struggle to popular cultural forms and institutions. This leads West to comment, in praise of Gramsci:

For Gramsci, ideologies of secularism or religions are less sets of beliefs and values, attitudes and sensibilities and more ways of life and ways of struggle manufactured and mobilized by certain sectors of the population in order to legitimate and preserve their social, political, and intellectual powers. Hence, the universities and churches, schools and synagogues, mass media and mosques become crucial terrain for ideological and political contestation.<sup>55</sup>

According to West, Gramsci suggests that philosophers are merely more conscious of their involvements in these “battles.”

For West, prophetic pragmatism occupies the discursive space between Dewey and Gramsci. By this he means that Dewey’s socialism, while building upon and even going beyond liberalism, suffers from his failure to adequately engage Marxist ideals,

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 139.

<sup>54</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications, 1994).

<sup>55</sup> West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*, 232.

while Gramsci's grip on Marxism remains tight even where it fails in politics and culture.<sup>56</sup>

Finally, Reinhold Niebuhr makes a salient contribution to prophetic pragmatism since West labels him "The Jamesian Cultural Critic" and claims he articulated a "Christian pragmatism," the latter of which means West views him as having "one foot in evangelical liberal Protestantism and another in American pragmatism." Niebuhr's specific contribution to prophetic pragmatism is his "tragic perspective ... as an impetus to moral critique of and heroic struggle in corporate liberal America."<sup>57</sup> This sense of the tragic makes a salient contribution to prophetic pragmatism by setting it apart from American pragmatism and providing a means through which to temper Emersonian theodicy and the belief in Promethean possibilities for human beings. Niebuhr's contribution of the tragic sense in prophetic pragmatism also has specific implications for educational philosophy as discussed below.

### **The Philosophical Roots of the Prophetic in Prophetic Pragmatism**

It is difficult to make exact distinctions between the pragmatist and the prophetic philosophical roots in West's program. Du Bois, Dewey, Niebuhr, and Gramsci (and arguably Peirce) contribute to the prophetism found in prophetic pragmatism. However, in order to be more explicit about this prophetic component, it is important to consider what West means by the term "prophetic." Putnam suggests that West means the "language of prophecy" that one might find in "the transcendentalist sermons" by which

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 221.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 150.

he means “the language of moral vision and absolute moral exhortation.”<sup>58</sup> While Putnam’s is an accurate description of prophetic *language*, West’s conception of the prophetic begins with what he calls “prophetic thought” which he articulated in a speech published a few years after *American Evasion*.

There are four basic components to “prophetic thought” as Cornel West conceives of it. The first, discernment, refers to a nuanced sense of history, one that eschews “pure traditions or pristine heritages” in favor of a “deep analytical grasp of the present in light of the past” that recognizes every culture as a result of “the weaving of antecedent cultures.” Connection, the second component, focuses on human empathy, or “never losing sight of the humanity of others.” The third component is tracking hypocrisy, a process that is both external and internal as it seeks to accentuate the gap between rhetoric and reality while maintaining a self-critical posture as well. Finally, the fourth component is hope. Here West makes a distinction. Hope is not to be conflated with optimism. He recognizes that we are “world-weary” and that we may have “misanthropic skeletons hanging in our closet,” but we face them by reminding ourselves that history is incomplete and the future is open-ended.<sup>59</sup>

This “prophetic thought” is certainly tied to the language of moral vision that West finds in African American religious culture. However, the roots of the prophetic are not limited to this formative part of his heritage. Before *American Evasion* he uncovers prophetic sensibilities in the confluence of African American Christianity and Gramscian Marxism in *Prophesy Deliverance!* (1982). More recently in his work aimed

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<sup>58</sup> Hilary Putnam, “Pragmatism Resurgent,” in *Cornel West: A Critical Reader*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 35.

<sup>59</sup> Cornel West, *Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times: Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism, Vol. I*, (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1993) 3-6.

at a more popular audience, he refers to the “Jewish invention of the prophetic commitment to justice” that happens to also be “central to both Christianity and Islam” and he calls this prophetism “one of the great moral moments in human history.”<sup>60</sup> Rosemary Cowan (2003) detects another location of the roots of the prophetic in West’s project. She claims that although he only makes cursory mention of the Social Gospel movement in his discussions of the prophetic, there is a clear, continuous line from Walter Rauschenbusch (the liberal theologian central to the Social Gospel movement and Richard Rorty’s maternal grandfather) to West.<sup>61</sup> She says, “Rauschenbusch believed that his form of social Christianity could constitute the soul of a worldwide movement for democracy, and in so doing he prefigures West’s attempt to use a Christian-derived morality to attack social evil and call for liberation and justice.”<sup>62</sup>

With this said, locating the idea of the prophetic in West’s project is still somewhat of an onerous task. His four components of prophetic thought may serve as a kind of heuristic device for discerning the influence of prophetism on West’s worldview, but it seems to fall short of fully situating the prophetic within prophetic pragmatism. The task becomes even more difficult as West’s corpus after *American Evasion* increasingly targets popular audiences and, as such, fails to systematically or explicitly build on the project of prophetic pragmatism. After the publication of *American Evasion* in 1989, West’s work scarcely mentions “prophetic pragmatism.” Perhaps the most fecund places in West’s work to mine for indications of the roots of prophetism are the

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<sup>60</sup> Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*, (New York: Penguin, 2004), 17.

<sup>61</sup> Although, in *Democracy Matters* (written after Cowan’s text), West commits a section of a chapter to the influence of the Social Gospel movement and acknowledges Rauschenbusch as its central figure.

<sup>62</sup> Rosemary Cowan, *Cornel West: The Politics of Redemption*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 74.



references to the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions of “the prophetic.” John D. Caputo is helpful here as he discusses the notion of the prophetic in *On Religion*.

But by “prophetic” I do not mean perfecting our predictive powers about the future-present, foreseeing what the future holds – as if being religious were something like being a weatherman. I am referring to what is called in the Jewish and Christian traditions “messianic” hope and expectation, which looks forward to the peace and justice of the messianic age.<sup>63</sup>

This messianic hope and expectation that seeks peace and justice is quite clearly congruent with West’s prophetism. What gives Caputo’s articulation of the prophetic even more resonance with West’s project is its (perhaps surprising) use of Marx.

Even Karl Marx, who fancied himself a cold-hearted scientist who was dispassionately exposing the futility of religious illusion in the name of revolutionary historical progress, had a bit of the wild-eyed Jewish prophet about him. As anyone who knows anything about prophetic religion can see, Marx’s “science” of political economy ... was a proscription of prophetic passion, of a prophetic longing for the messianic age (while he thought he was debunking religion). Marx was praying and weeping for an age in which the rich stop feeding off the poor and making their fortunes off the bent backs of the defenseless people in our society, off minorities and immigrants, women and children. That is the best side of Marx, the most enduring side ...<sup>64</sup>

West and Caputo seem to read Marx consanguineously, perhaps owing to their scholarship in and personal experience with religion. Caputo’s use of Marx in his articulation of the prophetic meshes with prophetic pragmatism not only because West makes use of Marx in his project but also because, while West makes clear that he comes to the prophetic via prophetic Black Christianity, he also makes clear that the prophetism in prophetic pragmatism is available to those without a religious foundation, even while it is compatible with certain religious worldviews.<sup>65</sup>

Certainly West is interested in applying the notion of the prophetic, be it rooted in African American progressive Christianity, Marxism, Judaism, or the Social Gospel, to

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<sup>63</sup> John D. Caputo, *On Religion, Thinking in Action* (New York Routledge, 2001).

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 16, 17.

<sup>65</sup> West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*, 233.

an effort to energize creative democracy. Toward this end he lists the “Jewish invention of the prophetic commitment to justice” as one of the three crucial traditions (the others are the Socratic tradition and the tragicomic tradition, the latter of which he finds in Anton Chekov and the blues) that can ameliorate what he views as the deterioration of American democratic energies and the rise of an ugly imperialism.<sup>66</sup> Yet, regardless of how closely we can trace the roots of West’s prophetism or how succinctly we can articulate its aims in real world effects, an argument remains regarding the appropriateness of linking prophecy with philosophy, specifically pragmatism. Both Clevis Headly<sup>67</sup> and Richard Rorty<sup>68</sup> reject the connection. Headly’s objection to prophetic pragmatism mostly echoes Rorty’s, so I will examine the teacher’s challenge to the student’s project here.

Rorty’s brilliant review of *American Evasion* has all the markings of a mutual admiration between teacher (Rorty) and former student (West). He praises West’s prophetic tone and decries the American intellectual Left for being unreceptive to such a tone. Yet, Rorty cannot accept the idea of the philosopher as prophet. One reason West is a professor of religion and not philosophy, according to Rorty, is that, “within both British and American philosophy departments, people who start acting like critics are viewed as ‘not really philosophers.’”<sup>69</sup> This reality is taken in stride by Rorty who positions himself as powerless to challenge it and without motivation to do so. Prophets

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<sup>66</sup> Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*, (New York: Penguin, 2004).

<sup>67</sup> “Critical Evaluation of Prophetic Pragmatism,” *Cornel West: A Critical Reader*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 59-82.

<sup>68</sup> “The Professor and the Prophet,” *Transition*, 52 (1991), 70-78.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 72. This statement eventually made something of a prophet of Richard Rorty as years later a few philosophers threatened to not attend a conference on Sidney Hook if Cornel West were going to be there. One particular objection to West’s participation in the conference was that he was no longer a philosopher, but rather a cultural critic.

are good and necessary, but they gain no advantage by being philosophers at the same time. The best philosophers can do for the prophets is to act as some sort of auxiliary.

“Pragmatist philosophy professors like Quine, Putnam, Davidson, Bernstein, and myself can play a social role only if they can find some prophet to whom to attach themselves.”<sup>70</sup>

Rorty takes his cue for this modest view of the role of the philosopher from the multiple iterations of the analogy of clearing away the rubbish that lies in the path of clear thought. It was appropriate for Dewey to marry prophetism and pragmatism because of the particular political and social milieu of Dewey’s time.

[A]t the turn of the century, the intellectual right was still trying to justify repressive institutions in either religious or rationalist terms. So bringing pragmatist arguments to bear against religious or rationalist arguments for political conservatism was a useful thing for James and Dewey to do. It is less clear that any such arguments have a function in the United States today ... Nowadays nobody even bothers to back up opposition to liberal reforms with argument. People merely say that taxes are too high, that their brother-in-law would have had a better job had it not been for his company’s affirmative action program, and that it is time for the poor and weak to start looking after themselves.<sup>71</sup>

Rorty criticizes West for being “enamored of the idea that his own academic discipline – philosophy – is somehow more closely linked to prophetic vision than are, say, anthropology, literary criticism, economics or art history.”<sup>72</sup> Instead of attempting to marry pragmatism with prophetism, we should let philosophers clean up the rubbish and leave the prophetic imagination to the prophets. “I think that it will be easier to encourage such [social] protest if we toss aside the last remnants of Marxist thought, and in particular the desire for a general theory of oppression.”<sup>73</sup> West responded to these criticisms in an interview with George Yancy in 1998 by claiming that Rorty was wrong

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 77.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 78.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

to accuse him of privileging philosophy over other disciplines with regard to their linkage with prophetic vision. Instead West claims that no discipline has a monopoly on prophetic imagination but that, “we’ve got to be able to give some fallible yet persuasive explanations of wealth, power and the state of weapons in our institutional and individual struggles to overcome forms of social misery.”<sup>74</sup> Philosophy is one among several disciplines that can and should provide such explanations (West admits that he is tempted to make a case for art as being more closely tied to prophetism, but he is not quite willing to fully commit to that idea). This answer indicates that West is neither willing nor able to shed his Marxist influence, as Rorty would have him do. West agrees with Rorty that a general theory of oppression is not necessary but the Marxist “remnants” are indispensable for keeping track of social miseries. West is able to maintain his pragmatist evasion of general theory by embracing Gramsci’s historicist Marxism. “I think one can talk about a Gramscian strand within the Marxist tradition that is suspicious of general theory, which resonates with Rorty’s suspicion of general theory, but it’s still not a question of eliminating the remnants of Marxism *per se*.”<sup>75</sup>

What is ultimately at stake here is not whether or not pragmatism and prophecy are congruent, but rather, what constitutes philosophy. Rorty thinks professional/academic philosophy has only an auxiliary role to play in prophetic vision. West might even agree with this as he admits he has “a deep suspicion” of academic philosophy.<sup>76</sup> Further, West does not consider himself a “professional philosopher.”<sup>77</sup> But he clearly does think he is “doing” philosophy, where philosophy is understood to be

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<sup>74</sup> Cornel West, “On My Intellectual Vocation,” in Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books, 1999).26.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 22.

“a certain cultural response to the world and trying to come up with holistic views, synoptic visions and synthetic images of how things hang together.”<sup>78</sup> Put another way, Rorty’s criticisms do not seem to appreciate that West has fully committed to what he sees as the Jamesian and Deweyan reconceptualization of philosophy based on Emersonian evasion of epistemology. Suspicion of “professional” philosophy is part and parcel of the Emersonian evasion that West sees James and Dewey as bringing into full articulation, even as they did not fully realize, in effect, that articulation. In this way, prophetic pragmatism, with its inclusion of Du Bois’s alignment with the wretched of the earth, its adoption of a Niebuhrian sense of the tragic, and its acceptance of Gramscian Marxism as a kind of prophetism, is the completion of the truncated Emersonian/Jamesian/Deweyan recasting of philosophy. In West’s view, to call him a “cultural critic” is not to exclude him from the ranks of those doing philosophy. In fact, cultural production and criticism is prophetic pragmatism’s preferred mode of *philosophia*.

This examination of the philosophical roots of prophetic pragmatism reveals that West seeks to create a program that evades epistemology-centered philosophy in order to create cultural criticism and a call for social action. This is evident through West’s highlighting the cultural critiques of Emerson, James, Dewey, Du Bois, and Niebuhr. It also can be seen in West’s view of the use of theory. In *American Evasion*, West rejects the notion that pragmatism’s antifoundationalism means that it must avoid all use of theory. He views those who consider pragmatism as taking an anti-theory stance are simply confusing all theory with “grand theory,” which pragmatism does reject. Instead

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 24.

West suggests a reconceptualization of theory as a means to “deploy thought as a weapon to enable more effective action.”<sup>79</sup> His whole project, as he sees it, depends on this use of theory. “If prophetic pragmatism is ever to become more than a conversational subject matter for cultural critics in and out of the academy, it must inspire progressive and prophetic social motion.”<sup>80</sup> Accenting the gap between rhetoric and reality, alignment with the disenfranchised, vigilantly and creatively working toward real democracy are constitutive of this social motion West wants prophetic pragmatism to inspire. It is this notion that leads Putnam to say in response to *American Evasion*, the text in which prophetic pragmatism is unveiled,

[T]o appreciate any of West’s contributions requires just what it requires to appreciate the contributions of the thinkers he writes about and (critically, to be sure) applauds ... namely *to experience the writing as a challenge, a challenge to one’s whole mode of life.*”<sup>81</sup> (emphasis in original)

### **Prophetic Pragmatism’s Tragic Sense and Philosophy of Education**

“Prophetic pragmatism’s” tragic sense is especially useful as an educational philosophy. Its emphasis on human agency makes it a helpful corrective to conceptions of the tragic sense of education that go so far in tempering utopian impulses or Promethean possibilities that they leave those involved in educational processes handcuffed primarily to chance and only the occasional volitional impact.<sup>82</sup> The sense of the tragic in prophetic pragmatism begins with the assertion that “tragic” is a term with many meanings. For “prophetic pragmatism,” the idea of tragedy is set apart from the

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<sup>79</sup> West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*, 5.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 234.

<sup>81</sup> Hilary Putnam, “Pragmatism Resurgent,” *Cornel West: A Critical Reader*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 20.

<sup>82</sup> See Nicholas C. Burbules, “The tragic sense of education.” *Teachers College Record*, Summer90, Vol. 91 Issue 4.

Greek notion in which “the action of ruling families generates pity and terror in the audience” and is rather tethered to “a society that shares collective experience of common metaphysical and social meanings.”<sup>83</sup> “Prophetic pragmatism’s” sense of the tragic emanates from what West calls the modern context of tragedy “... in which ordinary individuals struggle against meaninglessness and nothingness” within “a fragmented society with collapsing metaphysical meanings.”<sup>84</sup> This adaptation of tragedy to the modern context provides the criterion by which prophetic pragmatism accepts or rejects the sense of the tragic found in the various thinkers in American pragmatism.

West is critical of Emersonian pragmatism’s optimistic theodicy. He admits that Emerson did have a sense of the tragic, but “the way he formulated the relation of human powers and fate, human agency and circumstances, human will and constraints made it difficult for him ... to maintain a delicate balance between excessive optimism and exorbitant pessimism regarding human capacities.”<sup>85</sup> West argues that only “the early [Sidney] Hook and Niebuhr –their work in the early thirties – maintain the desirable balance.”<sup>86</sup> This balance is important for West since without it there is no way to confront what he calls “the complex relations between tragedy and revolution, tradition and progress.”<sup>87</sup> Prophetic pragmatism recognizes historical human atrocities and brutalities as well as “present-day barbarities.” In fact, it is this recognition that requires of prophetic pragmatism a conception of the tragic. It must not avoid these facts of the human condition. Yet, the conception of the tragic for the “prophetic pragmatist” is

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<sup>83</sup> West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy : A Genealogy of Pragmatism.*, 227.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 226.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 226, 7.

rooted in the modern context of tragedy, and for West this means not only the context of a fragmented society with collapsing metaphysical meanings, but also, and “more pointedly, the notion of the ‘tragic’ is bound to the idea of human agency, be the agent a person of rank or a retainer, a prince or a pauper.”<sup>88</sup>

West’s sense of the tragic is both critical of Emersonian theodicy and yet gives primacy to the agency of all persons. He claims that the Reinhold Niebuhr of the 1930’s best exemplifies this complex sense of the tragic. Niebuhr’s

struggle with liberal Protestantism ... forced him to remain on the tightrope between Promethean romanticism and Augustinian pessimism. In fact, Niebuhr never succumbs to either, nor does he ever cease to promote incessant human agency and will against limits and circumstances.<sup>89</sup>

Thus, it is primarily from the early Niebuhr that prophetic pragmatism derives its sense of the tragic. What makes West’s treatment of the Niebuhrian “strenuous mood” (and consequently the prophetic pragmatist conception of the tragic) useful for philosophers of education is that it is unwilling to sidestep real and unavoidable human atrocities, some of which are admittedly not transformable; while at the same time maintaining “utopian impulses” through an unfettered belief in the agency of all persons. West anticipates that this may make his sense of the tragic seem a bit schizophrenic – a Sisyphean outlook in which human resistance to evil fails on the one hand, and the promotion of a quest for utopia on the other. However, West claims that “prophetic pragmatism denies Sisyphean pessimism and utopian perfectionism. Rather it promotes the possibility of human progress and the human impossibility of paradise.”<sup>90</sup> This is a subtle but profound movement away from a navigation between excessive pessimism and a pie-in-the-sky

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 227.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 228.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 229.



utopianism to a kind of paradigmatic shift which includes replacing the polar ideas with a singular conception of the evil in the world; an appreciable portion of which might be *ameliorated through* human agency, precisely because it is a *product of* human agency.

Prophetic pragmatism is a form of tragic thought in that it confronts candidly individual and collective experiences of evil in individuals and institutions – with little expectation of ridding the world of *all* evil. Yet, it is a kind of romanticism in that it holds many experiences of evil to be neither inevitable nor necessary but rather the results of human agency, i.e., choices and actions.<sup>91</sup>

So, prophetic pragmatism as a form of tragic thought is suitable as an educational philosophy as it admits that educators are always working with incomplete information and that some of the obstacles in the way of real educative experiences are not transformable. Yet, in the end, it claims we can hope for more than just the occasional chance educative impact while we maintain the tragic sense. We can hope for real meliorative progress, even in the face of evils since some of those evils are human constructions. Put another way, instead of rooting the sense of the tragic in the notion of the passive *spectator* of events caused by uncontrollable fate, West begins with the concept of the *participant* in events of which we are the partial cause. This can be a lens through which we view Nel Noddings' position on the educational mantra "all children can learn" about which she has reservations. Although she understands and aligns herself with what she perceives to be the spirit of this declaration (that we should not siphon off students into categories of potential to learn based on race, gender, or social class), she insists that it can have rather pernicious effects when taken in a naively optimistic sense since not all individual children will be able to learn everything educators might like to

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 228.

teach them.<sup>92</sup> Prophetic pragmatism lends theoretical explanation to Noddings' treatment of this idea by claiming a "third way" that is not naïve optimism, nor excessive pessimism; rather it is a form of tragic thought that takes seriously human failings and atrocities while maintaining an emphasis on human agency and what Dewey called "democratic faith."

West gestures toward the idea of prophetic pragmatism as an educational philosophy in speeches delivered to audiences of teachers. When addressing a group of educators in 2000 he opened by articulating his hope that he would say something that unnerved or unsettled them.

Very much like the experience that we want with each and every one of our students for them to recognize that, if only for a second, their worldview rests on pudding. That kind of existential vertigo, that kind of tragic qualm that goes hand in hand with the best kind of education.<sup>93</sup>

This tragic qualm that West claims is constitutive of "the best kind of education" is congruent with the sense of the tragic in "prophetic pragmatism." An education that comes face-to-face with the fallibility of one's parochial assumptions and the instability of one's worldview is a prophetic pragmatist one. It draws on pragmatist tradition of anti-foundationalism and adds the prophetic sense of the tragic, with its emphasis on human agency. West summarizes what we might conceive of as a "prophetic pragmatist" theory of education in a speech to the National Council of Teachers of English.

Good teaching is all about unsettling perspectives and unstiffening prejudices and allowing persons to be emancipated and liberated from whatever parochial cocoon they find themselves in at the moment. Each and every one of us is always linked to some parochial cocoon; we are never free. It is a perennial process that takes courage.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992), 17.

<sup>93</sup> Cornel West, "Cornel West's Opening Remarks", Coalition of Essential Schools Fall Forum, 2000 [http://www.essentialschools.org/pub/ces\\_docs/fforum/2000/speeches/west\\_00.html](http://www.essentialschools.org/pub/ces_docs/fforum/2000/speeches/west_00.html)

<sup>94</sup> Cornel West, "A Grand Tradition of Struggle," *English Journal*, Vol. 89, No. 6, July 2000.

## **Expanding Prophetic Pragmatism with a Theory of the Self: Mead and West**

It would be a mistake to suggest that the absence of George Herbert Mead in prophetic pragmatism is an oversight on West's part since he is clear that the focus of his program is a call to political and social action/cultural criticism. He certainly appreciates Mead's contribution to American pragmatism as West mentions Mead in *American Evasion* as one whose omission from the text's "highly selective interpretation" of the pragmatist tradition is not a negative statement on his importance.<sup>95</sup> At the same time, prophetic pragmatism does seem loosely to suggest a theory of the self in the variety of ways it emphasizes human agency and social action. Again, West's project does not necessarily require the development of such a theory but such a move could be fruitful.

Mead's dialogical theory of the self is not only appropriate for the reconceptualization of prophetic pragmatism as an educational philosophy because of Mead's place in the history of American pragmatism, but also because educational theorists are often concerned with ideas about identity formation. Mead's theory is congruent with the major ideas that inform prophetic pragmatism and can contribute to this recasting of West's project for educational philosophy.

Mead's theory begins with the idea that the self develops out of social and symbolic interaction and that this interaction is constituted by the construction of and interaction with "the generalized other." Mead describes this by saying, "[it is] the organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self." He illustrates this idea with the analogy of a baseball team. Each individual player's actions are influenced by the internalization of an expectation of how all other players playing

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<sup>95</sup> West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*, 6.

the various other positions might act under a given set of circumstances.<sup>96</sup> Phil Carspecken explains the process by saying that the formation of the “generalized other” develops in conjunction with gaining “consistent understandings of one’s self from the perspective of others.”<sup>97</sup> This leads to a differentiation of the self into what Mead calls the “I” and the “me.” The “me” reflects the “generalized other” and the “I” is a kind of response to the “me.” This “I/me” distinction reflects the dialectical relationship between the society and the individual. So we can say that the “me” is the part of self that is capable of being objectivated in ways the “I” is not. In fact, the act of objectivation requires distinction from the “I” which is, in part, the reason why the “I” cannot be objectivated since each objectivation has an “I” necessarily distinguished from it. Put another way, the “I” is never an object of immediate experience. We cannot observe the “I” directly, we can only “know” it as an awareness of the past, never as the subject of present experience. Mead says, “If you ask, then, where directly in your own experience the ‘I’ comes in, the answer is that it comes in as a historical figure. It is what you were a second ago that is the ‘I’ of the ‘me.’”<sup>98</sup>

The “I” and the “me” must exist together, but once both are in place, the “I” is only a limit case to privileged access but is within privileged access only as a trace. One cannot even really notice or think of the “I” without actually bringing the “me” into play since the “I” is the pure subject that resists efforts to represent it. In other words, the

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<sup>96</sup> George Herbert Mead, *Mind Self and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1934), 134.

<sup>97</sup> Phil Francis Carspecken, *Four Scenes for Posing the Question of Meaning and Other Essays in Critical Philosophy and Critical Methodology*, (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 193.

<sup>98</sup> George Herbert Mead, *Mind Self and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1934), 174.

“I” essentially has no qualities, once we begin to speak or think of it in any context, it instantly becomes the “me” and so the “I” behaves like Derrida’s “trace.”

The result of this “I/me” distinction with regard to identity formation is that since the “I” is more strongly distinguished from action, we can be more certain about the nature of our “me” than of our “I” (this applies to a sense of worth as well) and therefore there is always something fundamentally uncertain about the self. This identity issue of uncertainty about the self and a sense of worth of the “I” alongside the more certain “me” that is the result of socio-symbolic interaction could be conceived of as theory of the self that is consistent with a tragic form of thought that acknowledges the “existential vertigo” that accompanies uncertainty of the self, the uncertainty of the worth of the “I” and as such fits prophetic pragmatist sensibilities. Expanding prophetic pragmatism in order to include Mead’s dialogical theory of the self, then, is effective for recasting West’s project as an educational philosophy as it offers a way to think about identity formation that is informed by a prophetic pragmatist sense of the tragic and shares the emphasis on the social nature of human development.

### **A Concern About Prophetic Pragmatism as an Educational Philosophy**

While prophetic pragmatism is suitable as an educational philosophy, there is a philosophical issue that is troubling when considering its reconceptualization for education theory. While the idea of a clear moral vision and even the use of moral language may not be problematic for a field such as education that is largely tied to secular institutions, the prophetism in West’s project (and therefore the moral vision) is so tightly bound up in religious narratives that some work will have to be done in order to

make prophetic pragmatism more efficacious as an educational philosophy. West is clear that his Christianity, rooted in the prophetic Black church is neither dogmatic nor infallible. In fact, he admits that it is possible that he is being deluded with regard to his Christian faith. So, by not committing his Christianity to absolutism, he is able to create a kind of “historicist prophetism” that clings to a skepticism and even an agnostic sense about what historical beings can know about the acts of a transhistorical God. In the end, West’s Christianity is a *faith*, part belief, part doubt, that he uses as a tool for the amelioration of social justice. Yet, for all the avoidance of dogmatism and narrowness (West even has an ecumenical sense in his work as he attempts to highlight congruence between Christianity, Islam, and Judaism) prophetic pragmatism remains steeped in religious narratives and unfortunately, while West explains his personal interaction with faith as being fallible, he does not fully work out a way for the religious narratives he draws upon to be intelligible outside the religious community. This creates a problem for casting prophetic pragmatism as a public educational philosophy. It seems that the prophetism in West’s project will have to be mediated in such a way that its prophetic sensibilities can be accessed by those who come from different religious backgrounds than West and nonreligious persons and communities as well.

Michael Perry provides a template for mediating religious narratives into ideas intelligible to a wider audience with his work on religion and politics. Perry’s project of carving out a place for religion and morality in American politics finds its practical expression in “ecumenical political dialogue.” He establishes situational/contextual and existential prerequisites to such dialogue in chapter 6 of *Love & Power*.<sup>99</sup> The most

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<sup>99</sup> Michael J. Perry, *Love & Power: The Role of Religion and Morality in American Politics* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1991).

salient situational/contextual prerequisite is the existence of political community. Perry claims that, “[successful ecumenical political dialogue] surely depends on the extent to which [a person] enjoys such things as material well-being, personal security, educational attainment, and political freedom, including freedom of speech and freedom of religion.”<sup>100</sup>

Beyond the situational/contextual prerequisites that seem to emphasize real democratic sensibilities, Perry articulates three categories of existential prerequisites for ecumenical political dialogue. The first is a set of basic dialogic virtues, including cognitive competence, respect, empathy, honesty, and sincerity.<sup>101</sup> Second are the attitudes of fallibilism and pluralism. By fallibilism Perry means adherence to self-critical rationality. By pluralism he means the acceptance of the idea that variety deepens insight, which in this context means that moral pluralism can be more insightful than monism. The third category includes the virtues of public intelligibility and public accessibility. Perry’s public intelligibility involves articulating one’s position such that those who “speak a different religious or moral language” can understand the position which happens through the use of a “shared” or “mediated” language. Public accessibility, then, is the result of successfully navigating one’s argument between the pitfalls of sectarianism and authoritarianism. Sectarian means a position that “relies on *experiences or premises* that have little if any authority beyond the confines of one’s own moral or religious community,” and authoritarian means a position that “relies on *persons*

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 91.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 99.

*or institutions* that have little if any authority beyond the confines of one's own community.”<sup>102</sup> (emphasis mine)

In order for prophetic pragmatism to gain credence as an educational philosophy, it seems that its source of the prophetic sense, Christian and Jewish narratives, will have to be carefully submitted to something like Perry's existential prerequisites for “ecumenical political dialogue.” Without a kind of mediated language that can make the prophetism in West's project intelligible to nonreligious or other alternative frameworks, it will be difficult for prophetic pragmatism as an educational philosophy to make complete sense to the whole of its intended audience. That being said, it does seem possible that the work of mediation, attitudes of fallibilism and pluralism, public intelligibility and public accessibility could be applied to the religious narratives that are so strongly linked to West's notion of the prophetic. Once those narratives are reworked in this way, prophetic pragmatism can be recast as an educational philosophy that emphasizes antifoundationalism, values real democracy, aligns itself with the plight of the disenfranchised and marginalized, articulates a clear moral vision and commitment to justice, and employs a sense of the tragic that tempers utopianism while maintaining an emphasis on human agency. Indeed, the prophetic pragmatist educational philosophy is a kind of “democratic faith.”

### **Hip-Hop and *Philo-sophia***

Any serious attempt at defining hip-hop or hip-hop culture must resist monolithic descriptions of its artists, artifacts, and audience. Mainstream media, politicians,

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 106.



teachers, and academics alike are prone to articulate severely truncated notions of hip-hop, the result of which has been a limited and dualistic discourse in the marketplace of ideas on popular culture. On the one hand, alarmists accuse hip-hop of a deleterious influence on youth. Hip-hop, to this way of thinking, valorizes violence and misogyny, derogates authority, and combines mindless lyrics with unoriginal music. These opinions are, in most cases, informed exclusively by media images, rap music videos, stereotypes of racialized, hypersexual bodies, and cursory examination of rap lyrics from commercial radio. On the other hand, progressives who defend hip-hop tend to limit their rhetoric to its counterhegemonic possibilities in socio-political terms. These arguments are largely focused on “conscious rap” or “knowledge rap,” the lyrical content of which typically thematizes counterhegemony. This subgenre is not typically commercially successful (although there are noted exceptions to this rule). The so-called Golden Age of hip-hop (roughly the mid-1980s to the early 1990s) and “underground” artists are the focus of this type of defense of hip-hop. This bifurcation of the discourse crowds out more complete examinations of hip-hop culture and serious aesthetic evaluation of its artifacts.<sup>103</sup>

Richard Shusterman’s venerable “The Fine Art of Rap,” in his *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (2000) and Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr.’s “Santa Claus Ain’t Got Nothin’ On This!: Hip-Hop Hybridity and the Black Church Muse,” in his *Race Music* (2003) are two such aesthetic examinations that should not get lost amidst the ubiquity of the more monolithic

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<sup>103</sup> See Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop : A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, 1st ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), Murray Forman, *The 'Hood Comes First : Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop, Music/Culture* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, *That's the Joint! : The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), Tricia Rose, *Black Noise : Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press : Published by University Press of New England, 1994). These works are examples of academic (or journalistic in the case of Chang) accounts of hip-hop that avoid treating it as a monolith. There is still more room for such complete and sophisticated treatments of hip-hop as the culture continues to grow and gain more influence over the larger popular culture while at the same time descriptions and evaluations of it continue to be oversimplified and truncated.

treatments of hip-hop.<sup>104</sup> I discuss both works below and adopt and expand Shusterman's aesthetic categories for examining hip-hop as a postmodern art form.

### **Hard Livin' Mixed with Cristal Sippin': Hip-Hop as Culture**

Examining hip-hop's connection with philosophy must begin by avoiding the dualistic discourse and monolithic conceptions by making inquiry into hip-hop as a culture complete with multiple streams of style, rhetoric, values, socio-political commitments, and aesthetic sensibilities. Part of hip-hop culture is, no doubt, reinscription of hegemony through impetuous patriarchy and misogyny, glorification of conspicuous consumption, and perpetuation of racialized stereotypes. Another component of hip-hop culture is the counterhegemonic "conscious rap" complete with progressive and radical socio-political rhetoric. However, limiting the discourse to these two sides of the same coin is to treat hip-hop merely as a set of products and doing so necessarily fails to fully appreciate the culture *qua* culture. This mistake takes its most familiar form in the conflation of hip-hop culture and rap music. Rap music is not reducible to hip-hop culture, though it is a product of the culture. Other products have historically included graffiti tagging, breakdancing, and DJing, while later hip-hop became associated with so-called spoken word poetry as discussed below. More important, hip-hop can be a description of something one *does*. Much like the sport of basketball has as its most commodified form or "product," the NBA (National Basketball Association), hip-hop culture has commercial rap music as its most recognized product. Yet, basketball is not limited to the product of the NBA since anyone can enjoy shooting

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<sup>104</sup> Guthrie P. Ramsey and ebrary Inc., *Race Music Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop, Music of the African Diaspora*; 7 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics : Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

baskets or playing pick-up games at any local gym, park, or private residence with a hoop. In the same way, hip-hop kids can carry notebooks and scribble rhymes on trains and spit them in the school lunchroom or locker room or headz can gather in ciphers and trade rhymes or spontaneously freestyle at a party, all of which may bear only a tenuous resemblance to commercial rap music. Just like it is possible for people to enjoy playing basketball and be simultaneously critical of the NBA, there are hip-hoppers that are distinguishable from and are critical of commercial rap music.

Hip-hop cannot be reduced to rap music or to one particular rhetorical stream. There is, in my view, an internal conversation in hip-hop culture that is constitutive of its resistance to simple characterizations. Even within some commercially successful rap there are internal critiques of the misogyny and conspicuous consumption in hip-hop, or the general wackness of some MCs. Shusterman, though he gives hip-hop its most sympathetic and sophisticated aesthetic analysis, characterizes this internal conversation as a set of “troubling contradictions.”<sup>105</sup> Yet, I take this kind of internal dialogue that hip-hop operates with as a characteristic that fortifies its status as a culture. Consider Brian Fay’s conception of culture from *Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science: A Multicultural Approach*.<sup>106</sup> Here Fay builds on Kenneth Burke’s (1957) idea of culture as conversation.

Cultures are neither coherent nor homogenous nor univocal nor peaceful. They are inherently polygot, conflictual, changeable, and open. Cultures involve constant processes of reinscription and of transformation in which their diverse and often opposing repertoires are re-affirmed, transmuted, exported, challenged, resisted, and re-defined. This process is inevitable because it is

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<sup>105</sup> Richard Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy : Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (New York: Routledge, 1997). It should be noted that Shusterman goes on to claim that such “contradictions” are a result of “rap’s rich plurality of styles” and “more fundamental contradictions in the socio-cultural fields of ghetto life.”

<sup>106</sup> Brian Fay, *Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science: a Multicultural Approach*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

inherent in what it means for active beings to learn and apply cultural meanings, and in the ideational nature of culture itself.<sup>107</sup>

We can also make sense of this internal and sometimes conflictual conversation in hip-hop through Anthony Giddens' idea of "structuration." The theory states that when agents act they draw upon available cultural themes in the composition of their acts. The resulting acts will often produce innovations with respect to the way these themes are configured and claimed. The milieu from which actors draw is called "structure" by Giddens but at the same time, he says that "structure" is nothing but the outcome of actions. Therefore, "structure" for Giddens is "the medium and outcome of action." Finally, because structure is always undergoing innovation, he calls the process by which cultural structures are continuously drawn upon, reproduced, iterated, and modified "structuration."<sup>108</sup>

Fay's conception of culture and Giddens' theory of structuration help us to understand hip-hop in ways that reveal the criticisms above to be misplaced. First of all, the internal conversation in hip-hop that is often conflictual shows that certain manifestations of hip-hop expression are indeed aimed at confronting those hip-hop iterations that would reinscribe various forms of hegemony. Also, Giddens' structuration makes sense of the way hip-hoppers constantly draw on a pool of cultural resources and produce innovations when they act. These innovations manifest themselves in hip-hop's rapid creation and transmittance of new variations in vernacular and sartorial style. This suggests that some criticisms leveled at hip-hop fail to recognize or appreciate its status

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>108</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

as a complex cultural system within which actors draw upon cultural themes and produce innovations when these themes are claimed.

### **The Roots of Hip-Hop: The Creation Myth**

So, what exactly is hip-hop culture and how did it begin? The generally accepted story of the origin of what we now call hip-hop is traced in Tricia Rose's seminal work on rap music and Black culture.<sup>109</sup> Hip-hop was born out of a very specific leveling of power; the 1970s construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway chased black and Latino families from their homes and into the insidious hands of "slum lords" where they were left with little to no socio-economic and political resources.<sup>110</sup> In turn, the local youth produced artistic responses that contributed to a kind of counterhegemonic culture consisting of what hip-hoppers now call "the elements": "DJ-ing," "breaking," "MC-ing," and graffiti art. Rose also contends that three central aesthetic concepts that began with these elements animate hip-hop culture; flow, layering, and ruptures in line. More important, she claims that these concepts are a "blueprint for social resistance and affirmation: creat[ing] sustaining narratives, accumul[at]ing them, layer[ing], embellish[ing] and transform[ing] them."<sup>111</sup>

Jeff Chang's narrative of the hip-hop generation is a more detailed social history that mostly embraces Rose's assertions and adds several layers of depth to the historical account. Chang situates the proliferation of hip-hop culture within a variety of social, political, and cultural phenomena throughout the 1970s, '80s, and '90s including the

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<sup>109</sup> Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, (University Press of New England: Hanover, New Hampshire, 1994).

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 30-34.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 39.

1977 World Series, the shooting of four Black teenagers on a train by self-appointed “subway vigilante,” Bernhard Goetz in 1984, the 1986 beating and murder of a young Trinidadian American in the Howard Beach area of Queens, and the infamous 1991 Rodney King beating in Los Angeles. But instead of beginning with the South Bronx, Chang traces hip-hop’s roots back to Jamaican “dub” music and the early experiences of Clive Campbell (known to hip-hoppers as DJ Kool Herc) in Trenchtown. Chang claims that Trenchtown is to hip-hop what Mississippi is to the blues and New Orleans is to jazz and he quotes Herc as proclaiming, “Them said nothing good ever come outta Trenchtown. Well, hip-hop came out of Trenchtown!”<sup>112</sup>

Chang calls the story of Herc and his sister’s back to school party in the rec room of their apartment building on 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in the West Bronx in 1973, a “creation myth.”<sup>113</sup> The Campbells had moved to New York from Jamaica 1967 and Herc’s father, Keith Campbell, was a sponsor for a local R&B band and had at his disposal a Shure P.A. system. Herc figured out how to rig the system to get the most “juice” out of it and so impressed his father that soon Herc was DJing intermissions for his father’s band. But Herc’s real path to fame, according to the creation myth, began with that Shure P.A. system at the back to school party in the rec room. Herc’s sister came up with the idea for the party in order to earn some money for some fresh back to school clothes. What neither Herc nor his sister knew was that the back to school party would beget the house party which would beget the block party and that this whole trajectory with the DJ cueing up multiple turntables to repeat the break beats and amping up the crowd with the microphones that eventually spawned the MC was the beginning of

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<sup>112</sup> Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop : A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 67.

hip-hop. The first block party was in the summer of 1974. After that, there was no going back to the rec room.<sup>114</sup> Herc became famous in the Bronx for his DJing and continued to play larger and larger block parties while experimenting with what would eventually become known as “the elements” of hip-hop. According to Chang

Herc wanted to summon the same kind of excitement he felt as a *pickney* down yard. Along with his immigrant friend Coke La Rock, he distinguished their crew from the disco DJs by translating the Kingstonian vibe of sound system DJs ... Herc hooked up his mics to a Space Echo box, yard dance style. They set off their dances by giving shout-outs and dropping little rhymes. They developed their own slang.<sup>115</sup>

This Jamaican dub-influenced aesthetic would be rounded out with what became one of hip-hop’s most important animating features – the break beat. By studying the dancers at the parties, Herc astutely noticed that people would get most hyped during instrumental breaks when the rhythm section of the band on the record was emphasized. As Chang says, “Forget melody, chorus, songs – it was all about the groove, building it, keeping it going. Like a string theorist, Herc zeroed in on the fundamental vibrating loop at the heart of the record, the break.”<sup>116</sup> So, Herc developed a DJing technique that he called “the Merry-Go-Round” using two copies of the same record and cueing them to extend the break beat. This combination of block parties, large and powerful sound systems, DJing, MCing, new slang, and break beats has subsequently earned DJ Kool Herc the title, “The Father.”

### **Black English, Black Expression, and the Linguistic Precursors of Hip-Hop**

Guthrie P. Ramsey links hip-hop to other Black musical and stylistic antecedents. His list includes the typical connections with Black homiletics and jazz, but he also

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 78.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 79.

includes double-dutch chants, scat singing and vocalese, and courtship rituals as constituting the roots of hip-hop style.<sup>117</sup> Even more interestingly, Ramsey claims that Zora Neale Hurston adumbrated hip-hop aesthetic sensibilities as early as 1933 in her article, “Characteristics of Negro Expression.”

These qualities and tendencies [that Hurston articulated that are constitutive of hip-hop] include a dramatic mode of presentation; the mimicry and revision of previous expressions; the will to ornament convention through improvisation; an additive approach to “linguaging” that inspires dense narratives with dense layers of meanings; male braggadocio; angularity and asymmetry; frank approaches to sexuality; and the importance of local cultural space, among others.<sup>118</sup>

While the inclusion of Zora Neale Hurston in a discussion of hip-hop is admittedly ostensibly anachronistic, this list of characteristics unequivocally applies to hip-hop forms of expression. This means, of course, that hip-hop expression is bound up in Black American forms of expression broadly, and certainly in Black American language.

Just a couple of years before hip-hop was first recorded and commercialized, Geneva Smitherman traced the roots and broke down the semantics and modes of discourse in Black English.<sup>119</sup> Smitherman, who with this and her subsequent work has become a towering figure in sociolinguistics, claims that Black semantics flow from four traditions, “West African language background; servitude and oppression; music and ‘cool talk’; the traditional black church.”<sup>120</sup> Many common English words have etymological roots in Africa, and Smitherman points out some of the most recognizable examples like *yam*, *cola*, *goober*, *jazz*, and *juke* (as in *juke-box*). In addition to the words that found their way from West African languages such as Wolof, Mandingo, Ibo, and

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<sup>117</sup> Ramsey, *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop*, 165.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, 192.

<sup>119</sup> Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin : The Language of Black America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977).

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 43.



Yoruba to American Black English, linguistic processes of the West African sort can be found in Black English.

An example would be the word *bad* meaning “good” in Black Semantics. This linguistic reversal process, using negative terms with positive meanings, is present in a number of African languages ... This kind of Black Idiom exemplifies words that are loan-translation (calques), in which the literal meaning of the African phrase is retained in Black English, though not always the exact word itself.<sup>121</sup>

Black semantics are also rooted in the experience of servitude and oppression. Put another way, Africans enslaved and oppressed in America had to create linguistic navigational tools to code or disguise speech in the presence of the white oppressor. Smitherman notes, “Since slaves were forced to communicate in the white man’s tongue, they had to devise ways of runnin it down that would be powerful and meaningful to the black listener, but harmless and meaningless to any whites who might overhear their rap.”<sup>122</sup> The need to find new ways of “runnin down” English produced veiled usage most notably found in the coded language of some of the Negro spirituals. Of course the spirituals are connected to a third source mentioned by Smitherman, the traditional Black church. The language of the Black church is animated by a conception of soul that is preoccupied with the spiritual world vis-à-vis the material world. Smitherman claims that the Black church was the location of a kind of language that articulated this soul that resulted from the confluence of African worldviews and sensibilities and the white man’s religion in which New World Africans found some measure of “home” as they appropriated it for their purposes. The emphasis on spirit, long suffering, and hope (read: “gettin ovuh”) came to influence secular Black culture in addition to animating the worldviews of church folks. Soul, as a result, influenced the language of the Black

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 45.

church and that language affected Black English broadly. As Smitherman masterfully illustrates,

The belief that the human soul transcends material reality, the firm commitment to the triumph of the human spirit over adversity, the certainty that there's a God on high who may not move the mountain, but will give you strength to climb – such are the fundamental propositions of the traditional African world view transposed to the African-American's Judaeo-Christian context in the New World. It is, after all, only a short distance from “sacred” Clara Ward's “I'm climbin high mountains tryin to git Home” to “secular” Curtis Mayfield's “keep on pushin/cain't stop now/move up a little higher/someway or somehow.”<sup>123</sup>

Curtis Mayfield leads appropriately to a fourth tradition from which Black semantics flow – what Smitherman labels, “music and ‘cool talk.’” This suggests (and Smitherman confirms) that “cool talk” mostly emanates from Black musical expression. Words and phrases Black music has given to Black English include the aforementioned, *jazz*, *hot*, *cool*, *cooking*, *doin it to death*, *gig*, and *funky*.<sup>124</sup> With hip-hop, arguably to a greater extent than either jazz or blues, musicians and artists continue to feed the Black English lexicon. Words like *bling*, *dope*, *word*, and others that got their first public airing through hip-hop have now become completely incorporated into mainstream American slang.

Certainly hip-hop language draws not just on Black musical tradition but on all four of the traditions that feed Smitherman's conception of Black semantics. The loan-translations of West African words, including the usage reversals are ubiquitous in hip-hop (“not *bad* meaning bad but *bad* meaning good” in Run-DMC's “Peter Piper” is an early and classic example). The language and stylistic expressions of the Black church and their influence on hip-hop is well rehearsed in Ramsey and elsewhere. The language rooted in the experience of oppression, while certainly informing it, takes a slightly different turn in hip-hop. Hip-hop vernacular is rooted in the expression of Black and

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 53.

Brown people, but it is also accessible by individuals of other groups who are down enough to immerse themselves in the culture. The coding in hip-hop language, therefore, serves the purpose of talking past those who are not down. It is also coded generationally as much as it is ethnically.

### **And It Don't Stop: Contemporary Hip-Hop Culture**

What we refer to as hip-hop culture today has evolved prodigiously since the days of the block parties in the South Bronx. The combination of DJ-ing and MC-ing produced rap; once a strictly underground musical form that relied exclusively on live performance has today become a hyper-commodified, multi-billion dollar international phenomenon tethered to the recording and music video industries. The bravado in early hip-hop manifested itself in tongue-in-cheek proclamations from ghetto people about one day having luxury cars and expensive jewelry that marked exorbitant contrasts from their lived realities. The contemporary hip-hop bravado includes flaunting one's real "cheddar," "ice," and "bling"; money, diamonds, jewelry, as well as cars and Cristal champagne. Today, hip-hop artists of the commercially successful variety either really own these things or at least have access to them for the purposes of music videos.

However, the evolution of hip-hop from a localized seizing of public space for the purposes of "social resistance and affirmation" by disenfranchised youth to a powerful international corporate phenomenon is not a simple, linear move from resistance to commodification. While commercially successful hip-hop artists often evince a more materialist textual direction than their predecessors through their meretricious flaunting, the counterhegemonic sensibilities are still alive and have arguably grown in

sophistication in the form of “conscious rappers,” “spoken word artists” (these categories sometimes describe the same person or group), and a thriving underground scene. The culture is also complicated by the possibility that even the most commodified forms of hip-hop reflect a kind of guerilla entrepreneurialism that was a nascent part of hip-hop from the beginning. Also, when hip-hop kids from ghettos get record deals and make “mad paper” they are essentially “flippin’ the script” (one of hip-hop earliest mantras) through the complete reversal of ghetto (mis)fortunes.

There is more evidence that hip-hop culture has grown in complexity. From the beginning, hip-hop has included a kind of patriarchy that, in its worst instances, has spiraled into misogyny. Also, rap music, though rooted in the Black aesthetic tradition,<sup>125</sup> is consumed by ethnic groups across the board. That white consumers account for about 80% of hip-hop music sales is almost a standard industry line, though this figure has been recently and rigorously contested.<sup>126</sup> The culture has invaded the political arena. The Hip-Hop Action Network of mogul Russell Simmons (founder of Def Jam records) boasts gaudy numbers on its website (hhan.org) of new young voter registrations through its efforts in metropolitan areas around the country (114,000 in St. Louis is the most recent figure at the time of this writing). Finally, the lines between hip-hop culture and the larger youth culture have become blurred as its music dominates the Billboard charts and its style monopolizes youth fashion. It has even found a home in

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<sup>125</sup> For an articulation of the notion that hip-hop is rooted in Black aesthetics that avoids essentializing see Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood : Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>126</sup> For challenges to this statistic see Bakari Kitwana, *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop : Wankstas, Wiggas, Wannabes, and the New Reality of Race in America* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2005). Also, hip-hop journalist, Davey D argues in his blog that the idea of “80% white” was floated in the early 1990s in order to bring advertising money into Top 40 radio stations that had begun playing rap, while Carl Bialik, who carries the distinction of the moniker, “The Numbers Guy,” for the Wall Street Journal, claimed in 2005 that the number is more likely about 60% (<http://online.wsj.com/public/article/SB111521814339424546.html>).

many daily newspapers as Aaron McGruder's syndicated comic strip "The Boondocks" consistently deals with hip-hop themes and employs hip-hop sensibilities. Contemporary hip-hop culture is a complex and powerful international phenomenon that cannot be captured by either shortsighted criticisms or naïvely celebratory responses.

Paul Gilroy challenges some of the assumptions of the emergent corpus of hip-hop studies. He claims that hip-hop is a culture in which "liberation and justice are still demanded but have taken a back seat in recent years to revolutionary conservatism, misogyny, and stylized tales of sexual excess."<sup>127</sup> This statement is accurate inasmuch as it refers solely to hyper-commodified hip-hop, the strand of the culture that dominates BET and MTV with non-stop "booty shakin'" and materialistic swagger. Yet, Gilroy ignores spoken word artists, less commercially successful hip hop artists like Jill Scott, Mos Def, The Roots, Dead Prez, and the underground scene that still places salience on counterhegemonic sensibilities. He also suggests that hip-hop scholarship is obfuscated by a notion of ownership on the part of some black critics.

Squeamish, "insiderist" critics do not want to face the extent to which, in a global market for these seductive products [pleasure and danger], white consumers currently support this black culture. They retreat from the obvious possibility that the music's transracial popularity might be significant in political struggles against white supremacy that undoubtedly lie ahead.<sup>128</sup>

This is an extension of Gilroy's criticism of "absolutist definitions of culture." However, artistic expressions can be rooted in a particular cultural stream and at the same time resist being tied to that stream exclusively. What hip-hop needs to deal with internally in a more rigorous fashion is what the real implications of the ownership question are now that it has attained such universal appeal. Hip-hop scholarship is still in

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<sup>127</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Between Camps: Race, Identity and Nationalism at the End of the Colour Line*, (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 178.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 181.

its embryonic stages and the fluid nature of the culture has contributed to its failure, as yet, to deal fully with the implications of its transracial allure.

Finally, Gilroy questions whether contemporary hip-hop can be seen as marginal or revolutionary.

[I]n what sense might hip-hop be described as marginal or revolutionary today? Anyone asserting the continuing marginality of hip-hop should be pressed to say where he or she imagines the center might now be. I prefer to argue that hip-hop's marginality is now as official and routinized as its over-blown defiance, even if the music and its matching life-style are still being presented – marketed – as outlaw forms.<sup>129</sup>

This leads him to characterize hip-hop as employing a “revolutionary *conservatism* that constitutes its routine political focus but that is over-simplified, mystified, or, more usually, just ignored by its academic celebrants.”<sup>130</sup>

This statement is accurate inasmuch as it refers solely to hyper-commodified hip-hop, the strand of the culture that dominates BET and MTV. Yet, it is not clear why the more counterhegemonic hip-hop expressions have received less attention by Gilroy since not only do significant numbers of hip-hoppers center their corpus and worldview on liberatory ideas, but also there are plenty of individuals and groups within hip-hop that offer strident critiques of the very kind of hip-hop expression with which Gilroy finds fault.<sup>131</sup> Gilroy's example is another demonstration of the kind of truncated treatment hip-hop continually receives in a variety of literatures.

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 180.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> See not only local, underground artists, but also Sarah Jones, Saul Williams, and even particular tracks from Kanye West and Common who, ironically, must be counted as part of the commercial variety of hip-hop. Common's 2005 album, *Be*, ponders, “I wonder if these wack niggas even realize they wack ...” in the track “ChiCity.”

## The Promise and Limits of Richard Shusterman's Pragmatist Aesthetics for Hip-Hop

Richard Shusterman claims that hip-hoppers are “down with Dewey.”<sup>132</sup> By this he means that hip-hop operates with a pragmatist aesthetic that finds its most complete articulation in Dewey's rebellion against compartmentalization that creates hard oppositions like art/science, emotion/cognition, form/content, pleasure/truth. Hip-hop also aligns itself with Dewey's disputing the traditional identification of art with its material objects that produces the “museum concept of art” that he criticized in *Art as Experience*. These ideas are rounded out by the connection between hip-hop and other Deweyan ideas about art including the challenge to traditional hard line between high and popular art and his “challenge to the fetishization of art's objects [that] redefine[d] art in terms of dynamic experience and process.”<sup>133</sup>

Shusterman creates four categories for hip-hop in order to locate its place in pragmatist aesthetics: “appropriative sampling,” “cutting and temporality,” “technology and mass-media culture,” and “autonomy and distance.”<sup>134</sup> In the same way that jazz created new art through the appropriation and metamorphosing of popular melodies, hip-hop lifts sonic units from a variety of sources including not only an array of musical genres but clips from speeches and sampled nonmusical sounds.<sup>135</sup> Yet, hip-hop appropriation, as Shusterman notes, divaricates from jazz in that it does not borrow “mere melodies or musical phrases – that is, abstract musical patterns exemplifiable in different

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<sup>132</sup> Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 212.

<sup>133</sup> Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life*.

<sup>134</sup> Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*.

<sup>135</sup> “Sampling” refers to the process of electronically capturing any sound that can then be manipulated (usually by a keyboard or synthesizer) and assigned any pitch or rate of decay, etc.

performances and thus bearing the ontological status of ‘type entities.’”<sup>136</sup> Further, hip-hop has, since its inception, emphasized, thematized, and celebrated its borrowing and sampling, thus challenging the fetishizing of the idea (or ideology) of originality. It suggests a conception of art that celebrates the derivative and does not attempt to downplay or deny the idea that artists have always borrowed from one another. The hip-hop style of appropriation and creative metamorphosing suggests that “borrowing and creation are not at all in compatible.”<sup>137</sup>

This leads to the next category of cutting and temporality in which hip-hop’s sampling and appropriation undermines the conventional notion of artistic unity and integrity. The emphasis in hip-hop is on open-ended continuation of artistic interaction with the object as evidenced by the endless collaboration, remixes, and reworkings found in hip-hop recordings. Shusterman finds another Deweyan aesthetic connection here as hip-hop suggests that art is more about process than product. This point is also illustrated by hip-hop’s propensity toward an open concept of artistic ownership. In 2004, *Wired* magazine included a CD with its November issue that included tracks from hip-hop artists the Beastie Boys, Danger Mouse, and Chuck D released under the new “Creative Commons License” which makes it legal for anyone to manipulate the tracks for personal use. All the tracks are now available through the Creative Commons website along with the claim, “These musicians are saying that true creativity needs to be open, fluid, and alive. When it comes to copyright, they are pro-choice. Here are 16 songs that encourage people to play with their tunes, not just play them.”<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, 205.

<sup>138</sup> <http://www.creativecommons.org/wired>



Hip-hop is at once dependent upon and appropriated by technology and media. Kool Herc's use of commercial technology is part and parcel of the creation myth of hip-hop. Yet, it is this same technology that allowed hip-hop to be reified and commodified. One result of this complex connection is an internal conversation in hip-hop about the merits and demerits of commodification and the attendant debates regarding commercial forms of hip-hop versus the so-called underground iterations. While some romanticize certain eras in hip-hop or its origins or characterize underground hip-hop as the culture's purest form, there is also a well-known sentiment in hip-hop circles that an underground artist is simply another name for an artist without a record contract. Hip-hop artists are, like others who produce popular art, mostly looking to get their work in the hands (or ears) of as many consumers as possible. Another kind of technology, the Internet, has been used as a tool for innumerable underground artists to put their work "out there" and in particular, the advent of the massively popular Internet community, myspace.com, has become a vehicle for artists without contracts to promote themselves and their music. This relationship between hip-hop and technology is decidedly "postmodern" for Shusterman and the postmodern challenges to modern artistic conventions are prefigured by American pragmatism, Dewey specifically.

Finally, Shusterman's category of autonomy is a further articulation of hip-hop's rebellion against the kind of compartmentalization found in modern notions of separate cultural spheres and the autonomy of the aesthetic. Hip-hop is replete with examples of artists who challenge this notion in their corpora. KRS-ONE is emblematic of this category and Shusterman notes KRS's simultaneous claims of status as teacher, poet, philosopher, and scientist. Then he concludes,

Of course, the realities and truths which hip hop reveals are not the transcendental eternal verities of traditional philosophy, but rather the mutable facts and patterns of the material, socio-historical world. Yet this emphasis on the temporally changing and malleable nature of the real ... constitutes a respectably tenable metaphysical position associated with American pragmatism.<sup>139</sup>

Shusterman's categories and aesthetic analysis amount to one of the most fruitful treatments the academy has produced on hip-hop. I adopt his categories for this study and add one more – kinetic consumption. Hip-hop is meant to be *felt* and not just seen and/or heard. Performances are animated either implicitly or explicitly by the question “[do] you feel me?” which is tantamount to asking an audience if it is connecting with the performer, if the text of the performance is resonating in deep ways with the audience. This connection, this *feeling* the performer or the performance unequivocally elicits some form of kinetic activity. It could result in dancing. It could manifest itself in intense vocal responses to the performance. It nearly always involves rhythmic head nodding. This kinetic consumption is another form of pragmatist rebellion against passive, museum conceptions of art and the mind/body dualism.

This study does much metaphorical head nodding to Shusterman's pragmatist aesthetics as applied to hip-hop. However, some of its limitations must be acknowledged. While Shusterman does discuss the socio-political aspect of hip-hop in as much as it relates to his aesthetic analysis, it is not fully theorized in his work. The connection between Deweyan metaphysics and hip-hop is a good start and to continue in such a direction it is necessary to add the concept of the prophetic to the analysis. That is in part why this study is not content with an established connection between American pragmatism and hip-hop. The prophetism in hip-hop must be examined fully and

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<sup>139</sup> Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 212.

prophetic pragmatism will allow for this as well as being congruent with the rest of Shusterman's categories and analysis.

The other area in which Shusterman's project must be expanded is related to the locus of his inquiry. If pragmatist aesthetics reveals that hip-hop is "down with Dewey" in that it conceives of art as more fundamentally a process than a product, then inquiry into hip-hop culture must privilege an examination of process and not product. No doubt, rap lyrics are an indispensable part of studying hip-hop. Yet, Shusterman's examination relies too much on his reading of these hip-hop *products*. In order to move beyond this, it is necessary to examine closely process in hip-hop and that requires more than a detached study of what hip-hop artists produce. In order to examine process, it will be necessary to live and walk with hip-hop artists, on the ground and in the streets.

## Chapter Two

### Laboring to Learn: “Doing Philosophy” through Critical Ethnography

In chapter one the connection between philosophy and hip-hop was explored through the lens of American pragmatism and specifically “prophetic pragmatism.” At the close of the chapter, I suggested that a shortcoming of Richard Shusterman’s “pragmatist aesthetics” as applied to hip-hop culture was that it did not capture enough of the aesthetic *process* and therefore the self-aesthetic relation since his analysis relies mostly on an examination of hip-hop’s *products*. I further suggested that the best the reconstructive sciences have to offer in terms of inquiry into artistic process and the self-aesthetic relation is ethnography. Yet, it is important to keep at the center of this study the idea that there is a deep bond between hip-hop and philosophy and therefore I articulate in this chapter a way of practicing philosophy through qualitative research. Along the way I examine ideas from Habermas, Carspecken, and Willis as they are the key informants for my methodology.

### Introduction

Ethnography or qualitative research and philosophy ostensibly seem to be disciplinary fields with little in common. Yet, the rise of critical ethnography, marked by Paul Willis’s *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (1977), strongly suggests a connection between ethnography and philosophy that could be explored toward fruitful ends. This confluence is underarticulated in Willis and in the methodology literature, but what is implicit in Willis and in subsequent critical ethnography is a kind of uncovering of philosophical ideas embedded in a variety of

social science inquiries. This chapter addresses a series of questions that might all be considered under the umbrella of the general idea of the intersection of philosophy and ethnography. In so doing, I reference the ethnographic work on hip-hop culture that is fully articulated in subsequent chapters and use examples of analyses from that study to illustrate ideas related to this intersection. Also, I lean heavily on Willis's text and suggest that it provides a kind of template for thinking about philosophy and ethnography. Finally, I employ the phrase "ethnographic philosophy" to describe my own work and other studies that seek to develop, uncover, and tease out theories that emerge in qualitative social science research. Ethnographic philosophy seeks to maintain careful qualitative research methodology while conscientiously drawing on philosophical concepts to produce sophisticated analyses. Put another way, ethnographic philosophy seeks to honor both disciplines that make up its whole, not reducing one to the other. Ethnographic philosophy takes a cue from Jurgen Habermas's conception of the relationship between the reconstructive sciences (which include ethnography) and philosophy. "According to this approach, philosophy surrenders its claim to be the sole representative in matters of rationality and enters into a nonexclusive division of labor with the reconstructive sciences."<sup>1</sup>

### **The Lifeworld/System Distinction and Critical Ethnography**

An examination of Habermas's discussion of the lifeworld/system distinction is an appropriate place to begin the elucidation of ethnographic philosophy since that discussion makes a salient contribution to critical ethnographic methodology. Habermas

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<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Habermas, Maeve Cooke, and NetLibrary Inc., *On the Pragmatics of Communication* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998).

introduces the concept of the lifeworld in his *magnum opus*, *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984), as “intersubjectively shared” and he claims it is “bounded by the totality of interpretations presupposed by the members as background knowledge.”<sup>2</sup> This lifeworld is a pre-interpreted world whose entirety cannot be questioned by those within it. It is not a falsifiable world since it cannot ever be fully objectivated for the purposes of a discussion in which it might be falsified. In fact, since the lifeworld is so basic to all meaningful acts within it, a member of the shared cultural community who questions the fundamental structures of the lifeworld would be thought insane or dishonest. For example, if I look at a nickel and tell you I see a square and you cannot convince me otherwise (namely that the shape of a nickel is circle), or if I point toward threatening storm clouds and tell you that I am looking forward to “the visitors,” you would probably question my sanity. The lifeworld is then, a “lived culture” that constitutes both the medium and the outcome of action. These ideas also have relevance to the self since people will often believe themselves crazy if others find them unintelligible.

A system refers to what Habermas considers to be the kind of human action that does not rely on communicative action for its coordination (as opposed to the lifeworld, of course). In other words, systems work to coordinate action between actors who are separated in space and time.<sup>3</sup> Societies are functionally differentiated into specialized roles of work/activity and thus, different institutions rely on other institutions to perform tasks of which they are incapable. This coordination constitutes a system. For example, doctors need factory workers to make their equipment, while factory workers need doctors when they are in ill health. Society needs teachers to educate and socialize

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<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* Volume 1, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 13.

<sup>3</sup> These ideas about “the system” as distinguished from the lifeworld come from *TCA*, Volume 2, chapter 5.

children and teachers need factory workers and doctors, and so on. Obviously, this system stands in contrast to the “lived culture” that is the lifeworld. The system can also be exemplified by the economic coordination of capitalist societies (this example and the Marxist criticism will be central to the discussion of Habermas’s concept of “the uncoupling of the lifeworld and the system” below).

This lifeworld/system distinction should inform critical ethnographic methodology in significant ways. Certainly in critical ethnography we are seeking to explore the “lived culture” that is constitutive of the lifeworld and to provide analyses that uncover social inequalities in order to work toward positive social change and a refining of social theory.<sup>4</sup> However, in order to do this, we must consider the impact of the system on the lifeworld (and obviously in order to do this we have to note the distinction). Habermas claims that the lifeworld of contemporary complex society is primarily “deformed” by system factors.<sup>5</sup> So, the distinction between lifeworld and system is important for critical ethnographers who seek to refine social theory and ameliorate social inequalities. Of course, methodological questions are indicated by this discussion. Can we ever “observe” a social system if we are always already existing within a lifeworld? Developing an answer to this question is beyond the scope of this chapter, but Habermas begins to address it by saying that access to social systems necessarily makes use of hermeneutic processes and therefore systems analysis includes

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<sup>4</sup> Phil Francis Carspecken, *Critical Ethnography in Educational Research: A Theoretical and Practical Guide*, (Routledge: New York, 1996)

<sup>5</sup> This idea will be explored further below in the discussion of system colonization of the lifeworld.

reconstructive methodology (yielding findings of different significance than analysis of the lifeworld).<sup>6</sup>

### **The Uncoupling of System and Lifeworld**

The work of critical ethnographers can also benefit from an examination of the uncoupling of system and lifeworld. Habermas claims that both system and lifeworld grow as they are differentiated from one another (as in the social evolution of tribal societies to modern ones). As the *rationality* of the lifeworld grows, so does the *complexity* of the system.<sup>7</sup> When this process reaches the stage of the modern society, the lifeworld that once was coupled with a scarcely differentiated social system gets reduced to a subsystem. At the same time, the system becomes more and more autonomous, with organizations connected through “delinguistified media” (that is to say, money, for example) that operate as steering mechanisms for “a social intercourse that has been largely disconnected from norms and values.”<sup>8</sup> Yet, systemic mechanisms are necessarily informed by the lifeworld. Thus, in modern societies, systemic mechanisms must be institutionalized which results in bureaucratic (economic) spheres that are regulated solely by these delinguistified steering media (money and power). Habermas adds that “Norm-conformative attitudes and identity-forming social memberships are neither necessary nor possible in these spheres; they are made peripheral instead.”<sup>9</sup>

This uncoupling of system and lifeworld depends upon “value generalization” and “reification.” Value generalization refers to the process by which traditions, religions,

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<sup>6</sup> Carspecken also begins to explore this methodological question in “Five Third Person Positions” from *Four Scenes for Posing the Question of Meaning*, (Peter Lang: New York, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> *TCA Volume Two*, 153.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 154.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.



normal and legal norms become culturally rationalized and move from the specific to the general. Here Habermas leans on Durkheim's ideas about legal development to assert the notion of "*universalization of law and morality* ... brings with it a disenchantment of sacred law" (emphasis in original).<sup>10</sup> This value generalization is partially constitutive of the uncoupling of system and lifeworld, mainly as a precondition, as the increasingly complex system mechanisms can only be coordinated through more generalized norms. A good example of this is the traditional classroom that has specific rules that result in "mechanical solidarity," as when student must raise her hand to ask permission to speak or use the restroom. A more constructivist classroom produces "organic solidarity" that might employ more general rules that are interpreted in a given context, such as, "respect others" and "don't be rude." A related phenomenon within the realm of value generalization is the construction of trust in social relationships through generalizing categories. For example, the general category "doctor" comes to elicit trust in relationships and so on. So, the growing complexity of systems depends on value generalization. Yet, as mentioned above, the lifeworld still informs systemic mechanisms. However, this happens through the reification of lifeworld phenomena where system differentiation causes "disturbances of its [the lifeworld's] symbolic reproduction."<sup>11</sup> So, the uncoupling of system and lifeworld depends on both value generalization and reification. This uncoupling eventually (and ironically, according to Habermas) reveals that "the rationalization of the lifeworld makes possible a heightening of systemic complexity, which becomes so hypertrophied that it unleashes system

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 83.

imperatives that burst the capacity of the lifeworld they instrumentalize.”<sup>12</sup> This provides an apt transition to a discussion of the “colonization of the lifeworld.”

With regard to reification, what is fundamentally reified is a socially constructed “agreement” such as the agreement that money represents value, or the agreement that a formal position in an organization has a fixed relation of authority in relation to other formal positions. These reifications form the basis of system media, and with system media in place we have the development of subsystems. The subsystems are not exactly reifications; they are rather coordinated systems of action that depend upon reifications that have been substituted for communication.

### **Colonization of the Lifeworld**

Habermas introduces the idea of the “colonization of the lifeworld” in Chapter Eight of *TCA*, Volume Two (1987). This notion is based on Habermas’s evaluation of modern societies. He claims that systemic mechanisms of integration have replaced the lifeworld as a unifying social force. This displacement happened alongside the diminishing of collectively held convictions that integrated society and is also tethered to the truncation of reason. In a modern society in which the system has colonized the lifeworld, “cognitive-instrumental” reason (a kind of theoretical reason conflated with technical reason) operates alone at the expense of aesthetic and moral-practical reason. This dominance of instrumental reason affects the everyday lives of people in modern societies since it creates subsystems that are nonnormative and are integrated only through the functional connection of action consequences (as opposed to communicative

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 155.

integration aimed at discursively producing a kind of “general will”). These subsystems are merely objectifications in which the only appropriate form of reason is the cognitive-instrumental. Therefore, it is impossible to discursively and collectively argue for alterations in structures of power and economic opportunity through an examination of their normative implications that reduces individuals to self-centered actors. The result of this colonization is a general loss of meaning and freedom.

One particular example of this phenomenon that has salient implications for my own research on hip-hop culture is the welfare state. Habermas comments on this particular manifestation of lifeworld colonization. “The effects of this – to date, final – wave of juridification do not appear as side effects; they result *from the form of juridification itself*. It is now the very means of guaranteeing freedom that endangers the freedom of the beneficiaries.”<sup>13</sup> The cognitive-instrumental form of reason exclusively dominates the subsystem of the welfare state resulting in a theft of autonomy from the lifeworld and its subjects. Indeed when any government-controlled subsystem intervenes in societal problems, it does so through hegemonic hierarchy. In the 1970s, early manifestations of hip-hop forms of expression in the South Bronx were a direct response to such lifeworld colonization when once close-knit working class black and Latino families were scattered into government project housing in order to make way for the construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway.<sup>14</sup> Of course, the result of this government subsystem intervention was a loss of meaning and autonomy. The early forms of hip-hop expression were attempts to seize both literal and discursive space in order to make

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<sup>13</sup> *TCA*, Volume Two, 362.

<sup>14</sup> For a detailed account see Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, (University Press of New England: Hanover, New Hampshire, 1994).

meaning and construct a sense of autonomy. Put another way, these early hip-hop expressions can be taken as efforts to *decolonize the lifeworld*.

### **The Implicit System/Lifeworld Distinction in Paul Willis's *Learning to Labor***

Paul Willis's seminal work, *Learning to Labor* (1977), is a fertile location for the exploration of the intersection of ethnography and philosophy. One salient example is that Habermas's system/lifeworld distinction lurks just beneath the surface in Willis's ethnography; specifically the idea is implicitly at play in "Part II: Analysis." In this section of analysis Willis employs a number of bifurcated ideas (some more implicitly, others more explicitly) that can be conceived as approximating system/lifeworld distinctions. One of these is the "system"/"structure" binary in which the "structure" resembles "lived culture" or lifeworld which is both the medium and outcome of action as opposed to the "system" that is the production of patterned action that coordinates society across time and space. Related to this more implicit distinction is Willis's explicit use of "penetrations" and "limitations." Here Willis refers to the way the lived culture of the working class "lads" can sometimes "penetrate" their conditions of existence.<sup>15</sup> Though Willis claims these "penetrations" are always "skewed" and "deprived of their independence," they are clearly associated with lived culture and therefore suggest a system/lifeworld distinction when taken together with the idea of "limitations." These "limitations" are the mechanisms that "confuse and impede the full development and expression of these impulses [that is, the impulses that constitute the

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<sup>15</sup> Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*, (Columbia University Press: New York, 1977), 119.

‘penetrations’].”<sup>16</sup> This is one way we find the system/lifeworld distinction. A penetration and a limitation could in principle be related only to lifeworld domination, that is to say, dominant ideologies only, not clearly linked to systems. Penetrations into racism and sexism would have some of this character because although the two “isms” work to support system processes and arrangement, those processes do not absolutely need sexism and racism. They do, however, need classism, which is what Willis’s inquiry is all about.

Further evidence that Willis’s analysis implicitly makes use of a system/lifeworld distinction is the association of “creativity” with “penetration.” This “creativity,” Willis claims, is often constitutive of a penetration and is not an individual creativity, but rather a function of group activity. Additionally, it is not the result of “conscious intention.” Here we see in the idea that collective and unconscious creativity informs “penetrations” another indication of a system/lifeworld distinction operating, albeit implicitly, in Willis’s analysis of “the lads” and working class culture. The system, for Willis, is social class and its relation to material production. That results in work conditions (as in factory work) that in turn produce a cultural response and this is where the distinction is most clearly at work.

As Willis’s work suggests a system/lifeworld distinction, so too does it percolate with the energy of a number of other philosophical ideas under its surface. This will be discussed at more length below. Here it is appropriate to report that Phil Carspecken calls *Learning to Labor* the first “critical ethnography,” which, among other things, means that it applies a kind of critical epistemology.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

## Critical Epistemology and the Fact/Value Distinction

There are a number of features that distinguish critical epistemology from more traditional epistemological theories when applied to empirical studies of social life. To begin, it calls into question the paradigmatic status of sense certainty that is so ubiquitous in mainstream research epistemologies. In so doing, it takes seriously Husserl's phenomenological challenge to this sense certainty. However, critical epistemologists do not stop where the phenomenologists did by replacing the sense certainty of seeing an object as the ground for its truth with the not dissimilar enough certainty of experiencing phenomena; they also consider the poststructural/postmodern critique/deconstruction of presence found, most notably, in the work of Jacques Derrida. When presence is dismantled (and Derrida's "trace" is all we are left with – and actually not even that since this is the concept that "destroys its own name") the phenomenological grounds for truth are dealt a fatal blow. So, critical epistemology eschews both sense certainty and phenomenological experience as grounds. Further, it resists the modified perceptual imagery embraced by some constructivists and naïve postmodernists. In their stead, critical epistemologists employ more communicative, holistic, predifferntiated imagery. This involves the recognition of what Phil Carspecken calls "cultural typifications" in which experiences are holistically recognized and not perceived.<sup>17</sup>

One cannot discuss critical epistemology without canvassing the fact/value distinction. Phil Carspecken maintains a distinction between facts and values for critical epistemology. Instead of a naïve fusion of facts and values (again, accepted by some postmodernists and constructivists), he offers "value orientations" that do not determine

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<sup>17</sup> This summary owes much to Phil Francis Carspecken, *Critical Ethnography in Educational Research: A Theoretical and Practical Guide*, (Routledge: New York, 1996). Examples of this type of imagery are provided in the first chapter of this text.

the “facts” we uncover in the field. This kind of critical epistemology resists the notion that the ideology of the researcher inevitably finds its way into an inextricable relationship with the researcher’s methods and findings. Instead, it operates with a more complex notion of the relationship between facts and values. Critical epistemologists do have value orientations that inform their guiding narratives for doing research. These value orientations clearly shape the kinds of studies critical ethnographers take up, however they do not *determine* the empirical findings of their inquiries. In the end, Carspecken sums up the relationship between facts and values as “interlinked but not fused” in critical epistemology.<sup>18</sup> How is it that facts and values are interlinked but not fused? All meaningful acts and thus all knowledge claims have all three validity claims necessarily so that it is impossible to assert only something objective, or only subjective, or only normative. It is only possible to foreground and background claims. So, in the speech act, and this is the model we should map over to knowledge claims, we have an interlinking of the claims, including value claims when we emphasize facts, facts when we emphasize values. However, there is a necessarily understood analytic distinction between all three claims such that the *response* to a factual claim can always distinguish a factual component from a value component. But, once again, the response will be in the form of a speech act and will have all the claims itself. Nevertheless, one can always respond to the response to make the analytic distinction between the various claims. This results in foregrounds to the acts progressively highlighting one claim in distinction from the others and it approaches purely objective, or subjective, or normative claims as limit cases. This is how these claims are interlinked and not fused. The distinction between

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 6.

them is understood by everyone with communicative competence, and it is a distinction used to clarify meanings, refine scientific vocabularies, and so on.

### **“Meaning Field”: Heuristic Device or Substantive Concept?**

Critical ethnographers make use of the concept of the “meaning field”; the idea that when human beings act meaningfully there is a bounded set of possible meanings that others in the setting could infer.<sup>19</sup> While researchers use the concept to articulate/reconstruct possible ranges of interpretation, it is more than simply a heuristic tool; it is a substantive concept to be used in social theory. This is because we do not merely construct meaning fields for the purpose of analysis, rather we can analyze a meaning field because it is a concept that structures interactions between meaningfully acting subjects. Put another way, ethnographers do not “create” meaning fields as a tool; rather, subjects interacting with each other in meaningful ways are aware (often tacitly) of possible ranges of meanings for each act and therefore the meaning field is a substantive concept in social theory. The following is an example of the use of a meaning field from my study of hip-hop culture. The setting is two hip-hop “spoken word” artists performing at a high school for students in an alternative program.

Following the meaning field is an “observer comment” represented by [O.C.].

VARIOUS STUDENTS: claps and other forms of percussive and vocal applause

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<sup>19</sup> Although we can never know as researchers if we have reconstructed or articulated the same set of possible meanings as those present during the act have tacitly or explicitly received, it is important to remember that meaning fields are not boundless, that the meaning of an act does have a limit to its field of possible meanings. For example, if a friend or acquaintance of mine sees me in the hallway and exuberantly smiles and says, “You the man!” I know that the meaning of his act is not to communicate to me that his pet died this morning (unless, of course, there are other contextual reasons to include this in the set of possible meanings). We can think of an infinite number of examples of how meaningful acts can be limited to a set of possible meanings since certain meanings would not be possible to conclude given the particular act.



[1]: *You GO boy! That was raw ...* (voice trails off/inaudible)

**[Meaning Field:** “The words really resonated with me” AND “I want to hear more” AND/OR “I recognize the truth in the lyrics” AND “You are ‘telling it like it is’” AND/OR “You are saying things that not everyone is willing to say” AND “I want you to keep doing that” AND/OR “I hope you keep this up”]

[O.C.]: This female student is obviously connecting with Melek’s piece. “You go boy” is a kind of general approval, saying basically “keep on doing what you’re doing, ‘cause it’s good!” The other comment, “That was raw” is even more interesting. Here it means that the words of the piece cut to the heart of things ... one key phrase in hip-hop vernacular is “‘keepin’ it real” ... in other words telling it like it is, with “no holds barred ...” The student here is saying that Melek’s piece cut to the chase and laid bare real issues.

### **Philosophy and Ethnography in *Learning to Labor***

As mentioned above, Paul Willis’s classic, *Learning to Labor* (1977) intertwines ethnography and philosophy despite the ostensible differences of the two disciplines. In fact, Willis weaves together standard ethnography, macro and micro-social analysis, and phenomenological theorizing of the self into what Phil Carspecken has called “the inaugural study for critical ethnography.”<sup>20</sup>

This classic study examines the resistance culture of working class boys in “Hammertown,” England, and how these “lads” navigate the shopfloor culture of their parents, their teachers, and the influence of the school (including how their lived culture contrasts itself from that of the school conformists or “ear’oles”).

*Learning to Labor* is evenly split into two parts that Willis labels “Ethnography” and “Analysis.” However, this is a bit misleading since there are plenty of adumbrations of deep and subtle analysis in “Part One: Ethnography.” There are a number of specific

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<sup>20</sup> Phil Francis Carspecken, *Four Scenes for Posing the Question of Meaning and Other Essays in Critical Philosophy and Critical Methodology*, Peter Lang: New York, 1999, 37.

philosophical ideas that can be located in the text. As noted above, there is an implicit system/lifeworld distinction operating in *Learning to Labor*. Perhaps the philosophical piece that moves closest to the explicit level in Willis's study is the theorizing of the self that can be found throughout the ethnography and analysis sections.

When I first read the introduction and the ethnographic portion of Willis's book, I noticed some salient ideas from *Plato's Republic* sneaking into my thoughts. Most notably, I was thinking about the tripartite soul and the myth of the metals. Juxtaposing Willis's conception of the working class and Socrates's appetitive class born with bronze or iron in their souls leads to any number of interesting questions about the influence of Western philosophical tradition on ideas of class, culture, and the self. And so, with these Platonically inspired questions, I located a theory of the self operating just beneath the surface in *Learning to Labor*.

Willis defines "labour power" as "the human capacity to work on nature with the use of tools to produce things for the satisfaction of needs and the reproduction of life."<sup>21</sup> This has significance for his implicit theory of the self in the following quotation from the introduction.

Class identity is not truly reproduced until it has properly passed through the individual and the group, until it has been recreated in the context of what appears to be a personal and collective volition. The point at which people live, not borrow, their class destiny is when what is given is re-formed, strengthened and applied to new purposes. Labour power is an important pivot of all this because it is the main mode of active connection with the world: the way *par excellence* of articulating the innermost self with external reality. It is in fact the dialectic of the self to the self through the concrete world.<sup>22</sup>

When Willis claims that this "labour power" is the "main mode of *active* connection with the world: the way *par excellence* of articulation the innermost self with

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<sup>21</sup> Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*, (Columbia University Press: New York, 1977), 2.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

external reality” there is a suggestion that praxis is the *sine qua non* of the most pristine self for working class peoples; that the true self only “shows up” through the exacting of this “labour power.” When conceived of this way, one begins to notice both a Marxist idea and an impulse that is clearly informed by pragmatist philosophy. The theory gestured at here seems to have application beyond working class people. Of course, in a class society, praxis becomes fractured so that thinking and “doing” are separated and assigned to different groups and we see this explicitly articulated by “the lads.”

So, it seems clear that Willis’s conception of the self is informed by Marxism and pragmatism. Yet, it leaves open the question of the ontology of the self pre-labour power, or, before the “innermost self” is articulated with external reality. What can we make of this innermost self prior to active connection?

There are other interesting components in Willis’s tacit theory. “Class identity is not *truly* reproduced until it has *properly* passed through the individual and the group, until it has been recreated in the context of what *appears* to be personal and collective volition (emphases mine).”<sup>23</sup> My added points of emphasis locate Willis’s qualifiers that indicate questions about his theory. First, Willis seems to be claiming that group identity is tightly bound up with the self. He is suggesting that there are gradations of class identity reproduction; that it’s *true* reproduction must involve the volition of the individual and of the group. Yet, it must *properly* pass through both the individual and the group and *appear* to be tethered to individual and collective will. The use of such qualifiers (i.e., “appear”) could be an indication that Willis’s analysis reveals the idea that while cultural practices often appear to be fully volitional, yet they are indeed highly

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

conditioned (this idea has a direct connection to Willis's idea of "partial penetration"). At any rate, one gets the sense that, indeed, this manifestation is not a simple borrowing from their parents, but an actual living and re-forming of it. This idea emphasizes again the primacy of praxis in Willis's theory of the self.

The discussion of Willis's tacit theory of the self indicates how he synthesizes ethnography and philosophy. As noted above, there are other intersections with philosophy operating just underneath the surface in *Learning to Labor*; yet examining Willis's theory of the self alone provides ample support for the contention that this classic work effectively blends philosophy with ethnography. It should be emphasized that the study is primarily ethnographic and the philosophical analysis and especially the theorizing operates largely at the tacit level; still this theorizing uses Marxist ideas and is shot through with American pragmatist sensibilities. Willis skillfully constructs a subtle philosophical analysis (exemplified by his implicit theory of the self) from a careful and sophisticated ethnographic study.

### **More General Thoughts on the Intersection of Philosophy and Ethnography**

Critical ethnographers, because of their value orientations, seek to go beyond describing social realities to enter the arena of uncovering multiple levels of oppression and structural inequalities. They are also committed to refining social theory.<sup>24</sup> To this end, it is worthwhile to reconsider ethnography as a discipline unto itself. Qualitative research has demonstrated the ability to think creatively about itself with the rise of critical ethnography mentioned throughout this essay and other developments like

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<sup>24</sup> Phil Francis Carspecken, *Critical Ethnography in Educational Research: A Theoretical and Practical Guide*, (Routledge: New York, 1996).

“autoethnography” and the conception of qualitative research as methodological *bricolage*.<sup>25</sup> I submit that, though it may not pack the avant-garde punch of “autoethnography,” a more conscious and explicit synthesis of ethnography and philosophy could provide fecund ground for qualitative researchers of the critical variety. The contribution of Willis’s esteemed work to social theory is clear evidence of the efficacy of this more explicit and deliberate connection between philosophy and ethnography. In this way critical ethnographers with an interest in philosophical analysis and philosophers interested in investing their theoretical work toward meliorative ends in social theory can intersect fruitfully with each others’ disciplines.

These kinds of cross-disciplinary efforts are, of course, not new. In fact, ethnography in combination with other disciplines has been used by a number of scholars whose primary discipline is not qualitative research. In the 1980s, French historian Jacques LeGoff developed the historical method he called “*mentalite*,” which has been described as “a blend of history, philosophy, ethnography, and social psychology.”<sup>26</sup> More specific to the current discussion and more recently, sociologist Loic Wacquant marries theoretical analysis with meticulous ethnographic study resulting from his participation in a Chicago boxing club.<sup>27</sup> Consider the following passage in which Wacquant reflects on his emergent knowledge of pugilism as he was learning the “sweet science” through his training as an amateur boxer:

Indeed, the deep imbrication among gesture, conscious experience, and physiological processes – to recall Gerth and Mills’s distinction between the three constituent elements of emotion – is such that a change in any one triggers an instantaneous modification of the other two. Failure to tame the sensory experience of punches flying at you amputates your ability to act and by the

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<sup>25</sup> Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *The Landscape of Qualitative Research: Theories and Issues*, (Sage: Thousand Oaks, California, 2003).

<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Ervin, “Interdisciplinarity or “An Elaborate Edifice Built on Sand”? Rethinking Rhetoric’s Place” *Rhetoric Review*, Vol. 12, No. 1. (Autumn, 1993), 92.

<sup>27</sup> Loic Wacquant, *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*, (Oxford: New York, 2004).

same token alters your corporeal state. Conversely, to be at the height of physical fitness allows you to be mentally ready and therefore to better master the feelings triggered by the blow.<sup>28</sup>

There is not enough space here for any kind of serious analysis of this passage, but it is clear enough, even at first glance, that Wacquant's work engages philosophical ideas (specifically here the mind/body relationship).

Finally, and related to Willis and Wacquant, my own work is an attempt to "do philosophy" through critical ethnography. This means I will explicitly employ philosophical underpinnings for my work in the field and use philosophical analysis of my ethnographic work toward the end of exposing social inequalities and oppression and to contribute to the refinement of social theory.

### **Mead's Theory of the Self and Qualitative Data Analysis**

George Herbert Mead's dialogical theory of the self has implications for social science. Here I will discuss those implications after a brief sketch of the theory. For that sketch, I will rely on Habermas's discussion of Mead in *Theory of Communicative Action, Volume Two* (1987). In Habermas's discussion of phylogenetic and ontogenetic development, Mead's work is most salient. Habermas notes Mead's use of the "I" and the "me."

Mead deals with identity development under the rubric of a relation between the "me" and the "I." This expression 'me' designates the perspective from which the child builds up a system of internal behavior controls by adopting the expectations of the generalized other toward himself. By way of an internalization of social roles there gradually takes shape an integrated superego structure which enables the actor to orient himself to normative validity claims. At the same time as this superego – the "me" – there takes shape an "I," a subjective world of experiences to which one has privileged access: "The 'I' reacts to the self which arises through the taking of the attitudes of others.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 93.

Through taking those attitudes we have introduced the ‘me’ and we react to it as an ‘I.’”<sup>29</sup>

Hence we can say that the “me” is the part of self that is capable of being objectivated in ways the “I” is not. The “me” is tied to the second person position, whereas, the “I” is bound up in the first person position. The “I” essentially has no qualities, once we begin to speak of it in any context, the second person position is ushered in and it instantly becomes the “me.” In this way the “I” is, at its core, an “evanescence,” behaving like Jacques Derrida’s “trace” and resulting in Phil Carspecken’s use of the phrase, the “I feeling.”

This dialogical theory of the self can certainly inform qualitative data analysis. Any study that intends to uncover ideas about identity formation or ideas about development and expression of the self could use this theory as a lens through which to view empirical findings. This is because Mead’s “I/me” distinction can be found operating at tacit levels in individuals as they live or otherwise consider their identity; when they articulate ways in which they express themselves and the way others receive them and the ways in which people can articulate fractures in the ways in which their “true” selves are recognized by others. In my own study of hip-hop culture that is certainly concerned with identity formation and theories of the self, I have applied Mead’s theory in my analysis. In fact, I have even used Mead’s “I/me” distinction as a high level code (I call my higher level codes that are rooted in philosophical ideas “speculative codes”) in my findings. Consider the following narrative passage from my notes related to this high level code. Here, the subject, “Melek,” a Jewish spoken word

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<sup>29</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume Two*, (Beacon Press: Boston, 1987), 40-1.

artist, has made several statements in interviews that I take to be related to Mead's theory of the self.

Storytelling, for Melek, is inspiring, motivational, and challenging. More important, it seems to be a means through which we: (a) recognize our "self" or become more pristinely cognizant of our "self." (b) begin to take notice of and eventually know "the other." Plus, there seems to be something extremely important about storytelling for posterity and local community. So, the story is the mechanism through which we build bridges both to an understanding of the self (perhaps approximating Mead's "I" as closely as we can) and an understanding of (perhaps a recognition) the other.

## **Kierkegaard's "Repetition" and Cornel West's "Prophetic Pragmatism" Meet**

### **Ethnography of Hip-hop Culture**

In addition to having previously noted the intersection of critical qualitative research with Habermas's system/lifeworld distinction and Mead's theory of the self, I turn now to a discussion of two more ideas from philosophy and their specific intersection with my own ethnographic inquiry. I discuss an idea from contemporary philosophy (West's "prophetic pragmatism") and one historical idea (Kierkegaard's "repetition"). I conclude with a preliminary discussion about validity in social science research and how "critical ethnographic philosophy" might go about validating its claims.

"Prophetic pragmatism," Cornel West's unique brand of neopragmatism is a whole philosophical system, an explication of which is beyond the scope of this essay. However, here I will deal specifically with an articulation of West's sense of the tragic found in "prophetic pragmatism" applying that idea to my ethnography.

The sense of the tragic in prophetic pragmatism is meticulously nuanced. It begins with the assertion that "tragic" is a polyvalent term. For prophetic pragmatism, the idea of tragedy is set apart from the Greek notion in which "the action of ruling families generates pity and terror in the audience" and is rather tethered to "a society that



shares collective experience of common metaphysical and social meanings.”<sup>30</sup> Prophetic pragmatism’s sense of the tragic emanates from what West calls the modern context of tragedy “... in which ordinary individuals struggle against meaninglessness and nothingness” within “a fragmented society with collapsing metaphysical meanings.”<sup>31</sup> This adaptation of tragedy to the modern context provides the criterion by which prophetic pragmatism accepts or rejects the sense of the tragic found in the various thinkers in American pragmatism.

Though West begins his genealogy of pragmatism with a celebration of Ralph Waldo Emerson, he is critical of Emersonian pragmatism’s optimistic theodicy. West admits that Emerson did have a sense of the tragic, but

[T]he way he formulated the relation of human powers and fate, human agency and circumstances, human will and constraints made it difficult for him ... to maintain a delicate balance between excessive optimism and exorbitant pessimism regarding human capacities.<sup>32</sup>

This balance is important for West since without it there is no way to confront what he calls “the complex relations between tragedy and revolution, tradition and progress.”<sup>33</sup> Prophetic pragmatism recognizes historical human atrocities and brutalities as well as “present-day barbarities.” In fact, it is this recognition that requires of prophetic pragmatism a conception of the tragic. It must not avoid these facts of the human condition. Yet, the conception of the tragic for the prophetic pragmatist is rooted in the modern context of tragedy, and for West this means not only the context of a fragmented society with collapsing metaphysical meanings, but also, and “more pointedly, the notion

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<sup>30</sup> Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (University of Wisconsin Press: Madison, 1989), 227.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 226.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 226, 7.

of the ‘tragic’ is bound to the idea of human agency, be the agent a person of rank or a retainer, a prince or a pauper.”<sup>34</sup>

Here the sense of the tragic found in prophetic pragmatism becomes profoundly attractive. It is both critical of Emersonian theodicy and yet gives primacy to the agency of all persons. West claims that the Reinhold Niebuhr of the 1930’s best exemplifies this complex sense of the tragic. Niebuhr’s

struggle with liberal Protestantism ... forced him to remain on the tightrope between Promethean romanticism and Augustinian pessimism. In fact, Niebuhr never succumbs to either, nor does he ever cease to promote incessant human agency and will against limits and circumstances.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, prophetic pragmatism is unwilling to sidestep real and unavoidable human atrocities, some of which are admittedly not transformable; while at the same time maintaining “utopian impulses” through an unfettered belief in the agency of all persons. West anticipates that this may make his sense of the tragic seem a bit schizophrenic – a Sisyphean outlook in which human resistance to evil fails on the one hand, and the promotion of a quest for utopia on the other. However, West claims that “prophetic pragmatism denies Sisyphean pessimism and utopian perfectionism. Rather it promotes the possibility of human progress and the human impossibility of paradise.”<sup>36</sup> This is a subtle but profound movement away from a navigation between excessive pessimism and a pie-in-the-sky utopianism to a kind of paradigmatic shift which includes replacing the polar ideas with a singular conception of the evil in the world; an appreciable portion of which might be *ameliorated through* human agency, precisely because it is a *product of* human agency.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 227.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 228.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 229.

Prophetic pragmatism is a form of tragic thought in that it confronts candidly individual and collective experiences of evil in individuals and institutions – with little expectation of ridding the world of *all* evil.<sup>37</sup>

Now, consider the following passage from an interview with “Melek,” the spoken word artist mentioned above. The context here is thinking about the meaning of commercially successful hip-hop artists/moguls versus the idea that hip-hop is essentially a resistance culture (the place from which Melek operates).

**Melek:** P. Diddy hosts parties in the Hamptons as Jay-Z does. Which was kinda like this white playground. Which, in some ways is interesting and in some ways it becomes about class ... I wonder how many people of color are there, how many white people are there and I don’t even know if it matters, but there are plenty of folks who will never be able to go to the Hamptons regardless of how many P.Diddys go. ‘Cause the very nature of that economic system is to have the base be *en masse* and, you know, have those people working ... I mean, I don’t know who P.Diddy’s Hampton neighbors are, but I bet when they see him and crew come for the weekend or whatever, I bet folks were nervous and I think there’s something really powerful in that and I think that that needs to happen too, but with the kind of music that they put out, it isn’t about celebrating the mundane and the everyday struggles of day-to-day people, it’s really, it’s ultimately a song of capitalism ... the overall systemic critique of capitalism has to acknowledge that there’s only space for a certain number who will be at the top ... and of course Jay-Z and P. Diddy in the scheme of things they make pittance compared to Bill Gates or other white men who will always

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 228.

be at the top. But if they can hang out together, you know, cool. I think Jay-Z and Donald Trump hang out at the same parties. But, I don't care. I mean, that doesn't mean that I have health insurance. And that doesn't make Chicago Public Schools better because P.Diddy has a house in the Hamptons.

An analysis of this portion of the interview certainly could benefit from an application of the sense of the tragic from West's philosophy.<sup>38</sup> There is, implicitly, an assertion here that human atrocities and forms of oppression are not all transformable while, at the same time, Melek indicates that, on certain levels, even some forms of non-transformable oppression can be ameliorated and challenged and sometimes that happens through hip-hop "ways of being" and hip-hop expressions of which Melek himself is generally critical! We can make good sense of this with the help of the sense of the tragic in prophetic pragmatism. Some forms of oppression found in capitalistic societies may resist complete transmogrification ("white men who will always be on top"). Yet, there is an emphasis on agency in Melek's assertion; human action within the oppressive system is not rendered meaningless ("I think there's something really powerful in that and I think that that needs to happen too"). Of course there is much more analysis to be done here, but we can see that the application of this philosophical idea to qualitative research is fruitful.

Another idea from philosophy I have begun to use in the analysis of my ethnographic study is Søren Kierkegaard's "repetition." Repetition is first contrasted with the Greek notion of recollection. For Kierkegaard, movement must be a kind of *forward*

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<sup>38</sup> It also seems clear that this passage indicates a host of philosophical ideas that could be of benefit in its analysis.

movement and not the “retracing of steps” that is constitutive of recollection. Recollection *undoes* whereas repetition *produces*. So the retreat of recollection (John Caputo calls it “antimovement”)<sup>39</sup> is simply another way out of the flux. Instead of staying with the flux, recollection suggests that we must retrace our steps out of it; that our goal is to recapture the eternity that always already has been. Its focus is on what has been lost, not on the “task” ahead. However, Kierkegaard’s concept of *time* constitutes a direct contrast with that of the Greeks. Kierkegaard’s “Christian time” considers eternity to have a *futural* meaning – “the life that is to come.” For the Christian, time (or temporality) “means an urgent task, a work to be done” while metaphysics seeks its way out of time. In Kierkegaard’s time, everything (or all eternity) hangs in the balance in each moment. This is the concept of time that is employed by repetition.

With this simplified articulation of Kierkegaard’s repetition in mind, let us consider another passage from an interview with Melek. Here he is discussing hip-hop expressions as spiritual/ecstatic processes.

**Melek Yonin:** There are spaces to find within freestyle where you forget where you are and you forget how long you’ve been rhyming ... the words just come. And, at its best, for me, it seems like you are really like a co-creator within the universe ... In a cipher when words are just being passed ... it’s just creation. I think, in recitation, that happens too sometimes ... there are times when you kind of forget, you transcend that space. To me, sometimes, I’m speaking in that space, but I’m also

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<sup>39</sup> John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project*, (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1987).

speaking to and for my ancestors and for people who can't speak anymore  
or who wouldn't be able to be in front of that audience.

Here again we see an opportunity to apply a philosophical idea to analysis of qualitative inquiries. Melek's experience with "freestyle" (a hip-hop form of expression in which MCs or "performance poets" spontaneously rap and ad lib a "rhyme," most often in a group, a "cipher," in which the verbal baton is passed around a circle of poets/MCs), is clearly a spiritual one in which time and space takes on new meaning; when "you forget where you are" and "how long you've been rhyming." It is interesting that Melek specifically mentions recitation as another means toward this spiritual end. Recitation necessarily involves repetition and Melek is claiming that such repetition *produces*, not unlike Kierkegaard's repetition. This production includes a kind of identity in which Melek becomes the mouthpiece for his "ancestors and for people who can't speak anymore." Of course there is much more analysis to be done, but it is clear that Kierkegaard's "repetition" will become another lens through which to view Melek's experience as a hip-hop artist.

After establishing the appropriateness of combining philosophical ideas with analysis of the results of qualitative inquiries, it is important to consider the concept of validity in social science research and how we might think about "validating" the use of philosophy in qualitative studies. To begin, critical ethnographers already lean on a philosophical idea when they use the concept of validity in their work. That is to say that we make validity claims in place of "truth" claims because our orientation toward "truth" is informed by the pragmatist notion of truth (or consensus theory of truth) that asserts all claims are fallible and we can only speak of truth with small "t"s and never with a capital

“T.” This, of course, will be no different when we “do philosophy” with our qualitative research. It is also important for researchers/philosophers to build bridges between their philosophizing and their subjects. Theories that are teased out or established philosophical ideas that are applied must be articulated to subjects in the study in a mediated language for the purposes of member checks and other measures critical ethnographers use to validate their findings. The use of mediated language will go a long way toward validating the use of philosophy in ethnography. Finally, researchers/philosophers seeking to validate the use of philosophy in ethnography must be prepared to experience a heightened sense of Peter McLaren’s notion of being “wounded in the field.” This is especially important in the process of validating our claims to use philosophy in our research. Using philosophy in critical ethnography means, among other things, that we will likely uncover deep ways in which we as researchers are complicit in wielding of some types of power (I have addressed this elsewhere in unpublished reflections on the idea of “researcher as gatekeeper”). We will also likely uncover challenges to the ways in which we construct our identity (especially likely when, as in my own work, the philosophizing we do involves identity formation!). Therefore, in order to validate our use of philosophy, we must be ready and open to being “wounded”; if we resist, our application of philosophy may evade validity.<sup>40</sup>

## **Methodology Conclusions**

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<sup>40</sup> It should be noted that additional, more practical suggestions for validating the use of philosophy in ethnography would certainly include Phil Carspecken’s suggestions for validating meaning reconstruction in the normative-evaluative domain found in Chapter Eight of *Critical Ethnography in Educational Research: A Theoretical and Practical Guide*, (Routledge: New York, 1996).

In the introduction I used the phrase “ethnographic philosophy” to describe my own way of synthesizing qualitative research and philosophy. I submit in conclusion what I hope has become clear in this chapter, that my aim is to promote and engage in *critical* ethnographic philosophy. For those of us (researchers/philosophers/educators) who find ourselves “thrown” into a value orientation that moves us to take on projects that might provide some level of amelioration of social injustices and oppression, those who resist a cold positivism that reinscribes hegemony and a naïve postmodernism that leaves us handcuffed to mere ironic reflection and misanthropy, critical ethnographic philosophy could be a method that matches our orientation and provides creative ways to advance social theory. Beyond that, if we are committed to careful critical ethnographic work and the conscientious application of philosophy, if we are willing to become vulnerable as researchers and allow ourselves to be threatened and/or wounded, critical ethnographic philosophy can be a way to work for justice and indeed love in a world that hungers for both.

### **Ethnographic Design**

The ethnography portion of this study was conducted over a three year period in Chicago. For roughly the first half of the study I spent weekends and holidays in Chicago while during the last half I was a full-time resident. The inquiry focuses on three local hip-hop artists, Melek Yonin, Idris Goodwin, and Dove Rock.<sup>41</sup> The data were collected through a kind of participant observation, semistructured qualitative interviews with subjects, and published and non-published written work of the artists as

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<sup>41</sup> By the time of data analysis, Dove Rock had moved to San Francisco.



well as musical recordings. My status as participant observer stems from the friendships offered me by the subjects of the study as well as my own participation in hip-hop culture. As I followed the artists in this study to schools, clubs, universities, panel discussions, open mics, and a variety of other performance spaces, I became somewhat of a recognized figure with my tape recorder or a video camera. I sometimes traveled with the artists to schools just outside of the city or even further to university shows thereby constituting something of an entourage. I certainly could not have attained this level of participation without the willingness and openness of the artists in this study who made me feel like a participant through the offering of friendship. Also, my status as a fan of hip-hop contributed to my participant status. I grew up listening to much of the hip-hop that the artists in this study have made reference to as being inspirational or formative in their development. The subjects of the study also turned me on to a number of hip-hop artists that were well under the radar of major commercial success or mainstream radio airplay and I consistently sought out and listened to the work of the artists to whom my subjects introduced me. For the last two years of the study I was a judge at a citywide teen hip-hop poetry slam organized by one of the subjects of this study. Finally, throughout the study, I participated in the culture through the creation of my own art as I began to write and perform hip-hop spoken word pieces and write and produce hip-hop music. It was not my aim to somehow join the subjects of this study in the community of underground hip-hop artists, yet, I wanted to experience the process of creating and performing in their genre.

The one-on-one interviews were each between an hour and an hour and a half long and were spaced out somewhat evenly over the three year period of the study. All

interviews included audio recordings and some additionally included video recordings. There was also video taken of a number of performances and in one case I had the opportunity to watch the recording of the performance with the artist and discuss it. In order to preserve the integrity of the ideas of the artists in this study, the recorded interviews will be quoted verbatim and at length when appropriate throughout the study, however, it should be noted that I gained much additional insight through informal conversation and casual time spent with the subjects and will therefore make ample reference to field notes in order to access the additional relevant ideas gleaned through informal social interaction with the subjects. Additionally, published and recorded works of the artists are reproduced here in such a way as to maintain as much artistic integrity as possible. With longer pieces that were not able to be quoted in their entirety, I have kept whole stanzas, verses, or choruses in tact.

### **The Participants**

Dove Rock, Melek Yonin, and Idris Goodwin are all part of the underground hip-hop scene in Chicago. Beyond this general connection, all three have worked closely with a local young authors' organization that specializes in the fostering of talent in the area of hip-hop and hip-hop poetry. I met Melek and Idris first at a hip-hop conference in Chicago and subsequently Melek introduced me to Dove whom I had already seen perform at some of the first underground hip-hop shows I attended.

Melek grew up in the suburbs and describes his experience as an "other side of the tracks" or a "forgotten" experience and he noted multiple times in interviews that suburban experience is not monolithic. His own was marked by a single mother who

moved Melek and his brother around from one rental property to the next in an effort to avoid landlords. Melek talks a lot in his work about trekking from the suburbs to the city and receiving a kind of voluntary education in hip-hop by frequenting places like Lit X, the now defunct Afrocentric bookstore to which he pays homage in a poem. Melek's formal education includes a substantial amount of college though he does not hold a degree. During the course of this study Melek performed a number of times on Russell Simmons Def Poetry on HBO and published a book of his hip-hop poetry.

Dove Rock grew up in the city (Chicago) although she bounced around from one neighborhood to the next. She describes her childhood and adolescence in rather bleak terms. Though she was not an official gang member, she talks at length about her connection to gangs growing up and the experience of having friends shot and killed at a young age. Her formal education ended before high school and she often made mention of her status as a high school dropout. During the course of the study, Dove released an underground hip-hop recording titled, *Sylvia Plath Easybake Oven*. The dark imagery runs through the album and reveals Dove's preoccupation with mortality that is discussed in chapter four. Dove also provided unique insight as the lone woman in this study and her work thematizes the experience of a female participating in the male-dominated culture that hip-hop is and this is examined in chapter three.

Idris Goodwin's family moved when he was young from the city of Detroit to a suburb. His experience with hip-hop goes all the way back to some of his first memories. He claims, "for me, rap was just kinda always around." After growing up in suburban Detroit, Idris came to Chicago to go to art school and he currently holds a graduate degree making him the most formally educated of the participants. When I first met Idris

he was doing quite a bit of collaborative performing with Melek Yonin. Like Dove Rock, Idris released a recording during the time of this study. In addition to recording rap music, Idris is a playwright (he is sometimes referred to as a “hip-hop playwright”) and I had the pleasure of attending one of his plays during the course of the study.

### **Chicago’s Underground Hip-Hop Scene**

Unlike the East Coast and West Coast hip-hop scenes replete with well-established and distinct personalities as well as the storied rivalries between them and unlike the meteoric rise of Southern rap onto the commercial landscape, Midwestern rap has yet to establish a clear style of its own that separates it in the way other regional hip-hop has in its commercial manifestations. Idris Goodwin once told me that the only thing that might be a defining characteristic of Midwest hip-hop is that it is known for hard-working artists. However, this was not necessarily unique to Chicago as he also said this is a feature of Detroit’s and Minneapolis’s underground scene.

Without spending time in urban settings other than Chicago for this study, I did acquire some amount of knowledge that suggests underground hip-hop transfers well from one city to the next. Almost all the artists I met in Chicago, including the three participants in the study, were able to travel and find places to perform in other cities and some of them did this quite frequently. Idris once told me in an interview that it wouldn’t take him long to “find the hip-hop kids” in any city.

## Chapter Three

### **K(nowledge)R(eigns)S(upreme)-O(ver)N(early)E(veryone)<sup>1</sup>: Prophetism and Organic Intellectualism in Hip-Hop Culture**

Practical movement and theoretical thought are united (or are trying to unite through a struggle that is both theoretical and practical). It is not important that this movement had its origins in mediocre philosophical work, or at best, in works that were not philosophical masterpieces. What matters is that a new way of conceiving the world and man is born and that this conception is no longer reserved to the great intellectuals ... but tends rather to become a popular, mass phenomenon, with a concretely world-wide character, capable of modifying ... popular thought.

Antonio Gramsci

i sought my generation/hip hop kids breakin down nouns and verbs to reality  
mystically/inclusivity/based on skills and never skin/ i re-present creation/from  
my light within/cuz how you gonna build apocalyptic space stations and tell me  
about sin/I'd rather dwell near ayin/from nothingness we do begin

Melek Yonin  
from "pieces of shalom"

I have argued above that hip-hop culture has multiple points of intersection with philosophy especially when philosophy is reconceived and unfettered from its quest for first principles, and that therefore hip-hop has a special connection with pragmatism. I have also argued that an even more fruitful examination of hip-hop culture can be executed through the lens of *prophetic* pragmatism. The remaining chapters will examine points of connection between *philo-sophia* and hip-hop culture as well as engage

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<sup>1</sup> The moniker KRS-ONE refers to the artist with the birth name of Lawrence (Krist) Parker, commonly known in hip-hop circles as "The Teacha" due to the fact that his efforts as a hip-hop artist have been primarily educative through albums (with his group, Boogie Down Productions) such as *Criminal Minded* (1987), *By All Means Necessary* (1988), *Ghetto Music: The Blueprint of Hip-Hop* (1989), and most telling, *Edutainment* (1990). By the turn of the century, KRS-ONE has gained status of a revered elder in the hip-hop community, earning respect and honors from efforts such as VH1's "Hip-Hop Honors" in its inaugural year, 2004. His 2003 book, *Ruminations*, is a kind of continuation of "edutainment" by other means and in it he fortifies and makes explicit the relationship between hip-hop and philosophy with his "Urban Inspirational Metaphysics." In 1996, KRS-ONE established The Temple of Hip-Hop that "operates within four departments which are called its 'M.A.S.S.' or ministry, archive, school and society" thus accentuating the blending of hip-hop and philosophy, education, and religion and spirituality. Notably, KRS-ONE is an inspirational hero to Melek Yonin, one of the subjects in this study.

in “doing” philosophy through the means of critical ethnography, as discussed in chapter two.

In what follows I specifically argue that hip-hop and philosophy intersect in two distinct ways. First, these artists often engage in philosophy (that is, when philosophy is considered broadly as it is here) through their cultural expression and their philosophizing is best examined under the rubric of prophetic pragmatism. They are aligned with prophetic pragmatism’s reconceptualization of philosophy that Cornel West attributes to Emerson (as precursor), Peirce, James, and Dewey and conceives of American pragmatism as an evasion of epistemology-centered philosophy. He notes,

To evade modern philosophy means to strip the profession of philosophy of its pretense, disclose its affiliations with structures of power (both rhetorical and political) rooted in the past, and enact intellectual practices, i.e., produce texts of various sorts and styles, that invigorate and unsettle one’s culture and society.<sup>2</sup>

Second, focused inquiry into the lives, work, and art of hip-hop artists yields especially elucidative theoretical insight with regard to ideas about the self, identity formation, and the self-aesthetic relation.

This chapter lays out the first connection by examining the ways in which hip-hop artists are engaging in philosophy through their cultural production and criticism, their artistic corpora and worldview articulations that are shared in community both formally and informally. This examination flows directly into the second intersection mentioned above. A consideration of the ideas of the artists in this study through the notion of cultural production as philosophy produces useful philosophical ideas with regard to identity, the self, and aesthetics.

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<sup>2</sup> Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy : A Genealogy of Pragmatism, The Wisconsin Project on American Writers* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

Hip-hop artists embody the intersection of Dewey and Gramsci in prophetic pragmatism. Their philosophy takes cultural form through their artistic products and the critical conversations about the art that hip-hop produces and therefore aligns itself with West's idea of the Deweyan evasion of epistemology-centered philosophy. They are also certainly organically linked with the community/communities they attempt to uplift. Though many hip-hop artists both of the commercially successful kind and those from the so-called underground have varying levels of formal education, their theoretical insight has much less in common with professional philosophy, strictly conceived, while it is clearly congruent with Gramscian notions of intellectualism. So, organically connected to the groups with which they align, hip-hop artists produce theoretical thought, connected to practice, via cultural production and criticism.

In addition to embodying this Dewey/Gramsci intersection, hip-hoppers evince the prophetism in prophetic pragmatism. I want to be clear about the use of the term "prophetic" here. It is a word that has a history of being associated with hip-hop and with some rap musicians in particular. The late Tupac Shakur comes immediately to mind when one thinks of this association. Although I would certainly argue for Tupac's status as (commercial) hip-hop's preeminent example of organic intellectualism, the kind of prophetism usually attributed to him is dissimilar to the definition of prophetism employed here. In hip-hop lore, when "prophet" is juxtaposed with Tupac it is typically meant to describe his hyper-cognizance of his mortality to the point of producing multiple artistic predictions of his own early demise.<sup>3</sup> That kind of predictive power is not emphasized in the idea of the prophetic used here. Instead, the focus is on a kind of

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<sup>3</sup> See Michael Eric Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me : Searching for Tupac Shakur* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2001).

language of moral vision, a prophetic passion for confronting oppression and social injustice. This kind of prophetism aligns itself with the marginalized and counter-cultural voices that are lost or misrepresented in the mainstream (see discussion of prophetism in chapter one). It is animated by courageous and frank speech, vulnerability, and a hope that is earned through organic attachments with the communities on behalf of which they speak. The idea of courageous and frank speech is first examined below with regard to hip-hop culture generally, then as it is found in the so-called underground participants of this study. Next, Gramsci's notion of the organic intellectual, as it is treated by Cornel West, will be examined, again, as a component of hip-hop broadly and then specifically applied to the work and ideas of the artists of this study.

### **“Say It Plain”; or What’s the Difference Between Gwen Ifill and Kanye West?**

Kanye West set off a firestorm with his remarks on NBC’s televised Hurricane Katrina relief concert on September 2, 2005. The comments came as part of a segue in which comedian Mike Myers and West were supposed to read from a script about the Katrina devastation. But, in true hip-hop improvisational style, West went off script and used his part of the 90-second segment to air grievances about the racist media coverage of the aftermath in New Orleans and eventually gave his assertion the trenchant cadence, “George Bush doesn’t care about Black people!”<sup>4</sup>

Within minutes the blogosphere was littered with anti-Kanye rage ranging from “Who the *fuck* is Kanye West?” to “Kanye West says Bush *hates* black people” to “Kanye West is a punk. There was no need to say what he said, even if he believes it. The

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<sup>4</sup> Lisa de Moraes, “kanye west’s torrent of criticism, live on nbc,” <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/03/AR2005090300165.html>



fundraiser was not a political platform for Bush-bashers to spew their anti-Bush rhetoric.”<sup>5</sup> Of course, there was also a salient amount of support for West by bloggers as well. While it would be nearly impossible to say which side won the Internet battle over the incendiary remarks, it is clear that the overall mainstream American reaction was something like “even if someone really thinks George W. Bush doesn’t care about Black people, that just isn’t the sort of thing that should be said on television, especially in the context of American people doing the much more constructive work of raising money for relief efforts.” What is also clear is that as a result of the ad-lib, scores of people who had never heard of Kanye West before were talking about him and what he said during the NBC benefit concert. The argument could be made that the West comments helped to fix race firmly into the American conversation about the Katrina disaster. In fact, in the aftermath of his remarks there was significant media coverage of polls suggesting that most Black folks in America believed that the federal government response to the disaster would have been quicker and better had the majority of Katrina’s victims been white while, conversely, most white people believed the response would have been no different if the victims would have been mostly white.

In the weeks following the NBC event that aired live on the East Coast but was edited for its delayed broadcast on the West Coast (call it a “script malfunction”), a number of African-American journalists weighed in on Kanye West’s statement. Among the most interesting responses was the print/television pair of Eugene Robinson and Gwen Ifill on September 18, 2005. Speaking as a guest on NBC’s “Meet the Press,” Ifill

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted as well that a common theme by some bloggers was that West’s comments were obviously a marketing ploy for his sophomore album, *Late Registration* (2005), which had been released a few days before the event. The intent of most who made this claim seemed to be to say something disparaging about West while at the same time challenging the veracity of the substance of his comments, something like, “it’s not really true, he’s just saying it to sell records.” What is unclear to me is if these people considered the possibility that West’s comments might discourage sales in some markets.

responded to host Tim Russert's question about the poll mentioned above regarding the question of the speed of the response.

You know, I'm going to take a line from Gene Robinson's column this morning where he talked about Kanye West, the rapper, coming out and saying George Bush doesn't care about black people. Well, even though what--to a lot of people--and Condoleezza Rice has said, "Oh, come on, that's ridiculous"--the question is the wrong question, whether he personally cares. This isn't about whether the president is a racist or whether anybody in his family is. It's a question about whether this catastrophe exposed a divide that was already there in a way that allowed not only black folks but a lot of white folks, too, to say, "There is a real problem here."

Heretofore, the Republicans and Ken Mehlman, the head of the Republican National Committee, and the White House, had been approaching this in a purely political sense. "Let's see if we can peel off some black voters, black conservatives, go at them through the churches." What this has exposed is that this is not a political solution. This is not a political problem. This is a social concern, which has been roiling for a while. But that it took something this catastrophic for the president to address, in the way he did, in his speech Thursday night, and, even then, only addressing it as a regional concern.<sup>6</sup>

"Gene Robinson's column" on the op-ed page of the Washington Post to which Ifill referred had this to say about the West comments.

I don't expect the president to know who Kanye West is, since hip-hop isn't his thing, and maybe he shouldn't care that this talented, impertinent young man told a national television audience that "George Bush doesn't care about black people." But shouldn't he give some thought to the polls indicating that three out of four African Americans agree? One reference to historical racism, as if he had just learned of it, won't change many minds. The vast majority of black people in this country believe their president doesn't care a hoot about them, and that doesn't provoke even a tinge of where-did-I-go-wrong?<sup>7</sup>

It is first important to note that Ifill's suggestion that Kanye West's "question is the wrong question" seems to be a rather thin reading of West's participation in the debate. Indeed, as mentioned above, it is not altogether clear whether the conversation about the Katrina disaster would include as bright a spotlight on race as it has without West's improvisation on the NBC television special. Also, Ifill might be inadvertently trivializing West's comments by suggesting that he was onto the wrong question by

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9327333/>

<sup>7</sup> Eugene Robinson, "beyond contrition," <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/17/AR2005091700974.html?sub=new>

proclaiming that Bush doesn't "personally" care about Black people and that the larger and more appropriate area of inquiry is the larger "social concern" that Katrina exposed that Bush and the Republican party policies have failed to adequately address. Yet, Kanye West did not use the adverb "personally" and it is certainly conceivable that the meaning of his words was indeed something like what Ifill suggested was the real question about Bush policies and the "social concern" Katrina exposed.

Robinson's column to which Ifill ironically refers does not at all claim that West has raised the wrong question. On the contrary, Robinson seems to say that if Bush doesn't respect the messenger, he ought to at least pay heed to the message ("shouldn't he [Bush] give some thought to the polls indicating that three out of four African Americans agree [with Kanye West]?"). So, Ifill's mention of Condoleezza Rice's reaction that it is "ridiculous" to suggest that George Bush doesn't "personally" care about Black people seems misplaced in one sense because such a characterization of West's comments might not be true to his intent, but this reference (and Ifill seems to say she agrees with Rice) is also misplaced because she wants to align herself in some way with Robinson who clearly disagrees with Rice's reaction and indeed, by the end of her comments, Ifill agrees with Robinson that Katrina exposed race as a substantive social issue that Bush and other conservatives have failed to treat seriously enough.

In the final analysis, perhaps Gwen Ifill and Eugene Robinson are not saying anything much different than Kanye West said. The difference is in the delivery. Kanye West is hip-hop. Ifill and Robinson are not.

### **Prophets and *Parrhesiasts***

My introduction to the underground hip-hop scene in Chicago was at an international conference on "hip-hop and social change" hosted by a museum on the

city's south side in 2003. Panels and workshops were facilitated and attended by hip-hop artists, scholars, journalists, and enthusiasts from around the globe. The scope of the conference was impressive. Topics of panel discussions ranged from hip-hop's cultural status to its political present and future while artists and educators conducted workshops on everything hip-hop from dance to rap to spoken word. There was even a workshop dedicated explicitly to hip-hop and education. The common and banal perception of hip-hop as strictly a genre of music was dismantled at every turn here from the topics of discussion to the participants and attendees to the very fact that the conference was taking place at a reputable Chicago museum. The two-day affair culminated with commercially successful (though also known for their more thoughtful/insightful lyrical content) MCs Mos Def and Talib Kweli delivering a joint keynote address, which amounted to a kind of state of the hip-hop union, to a standing room only crowd in the museum's ample theater.

As a fan of hip-hop and a scholar with an emergent academic interest in the culture, I was aware of the growing number of organizing efforts within hip-hop, especially those that included or were hospitable to scholarly inquiry, yet this conference was bigger and broader and better attended than any other previous effort I had known. To be clear, this conference was not one of the many gatherings that use the name of hip-hop to organize youth for a cause with the recognition that urban, minority teenagers and students, by and large, speak the language of hip-hop and can be organized around it. Instead, this conference, while it did not take an exclusionary position toward hip-hop's teenage audience, was about taking a kind of internal audit of hip-hop's socio-cultural status, taking stock of its current and future socio-political efficacy, and generally promoting the internal dialogue within the culture that inevitably unmask sharp

ideological divisions between schools of thought inside the culture. It, therefore, was attended and facilitated by those who participate in the culture at the level of this internal conversation and reflection. In this case, that included some teenage hip-hop enthusiasts, but mostly the conference was a conversation between artists, journalists, and educators. Many of these participants (facilitators, panelists, attendees) were local.

Melek Yonin<sup>8</sup>, local MC/spoken word artist was on the first panel I attended. He joined other local hip-hop artists in a general discussion of hip-hop's cultural status. It was immediately apparent that Melek was deeply reflective and decidedly articulate. After the session was over, I met Melek face-to-face for the first time after a few phone conversations, and he immediately accepted me as a kind of friend/colleague. Not only was he summarily accepting of a role in the study, but he was poised to introduce me to any number of his local colleagues and a number of others at the conference with whom he had a connection.

Melek introduced me to Idris Goodwin after the panel discussion. Idris had been working with Melek on the beginnings of a two-man hip-hop show that combined rap, spoken word, and comedic sketches. Within minutes of meeting both of them, I was invited to go run errands, have lunch, and introduce my study to them. They were both willing to participate and seemed genuinely interested in the study. Their easy manner

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<sup>8</sup> I will continue to refer to this particular artist as "Melek" throughout the body of this study. Melek Yonin is the Hebrew name that operates, for him, as a kind of alias. He is mostly known by what he refers to as his "government name," Kevin Coval. While it is certainly uncommon to make mention of an actual name of a participant in an ethnography, I do so here, after much discussion with the artist, in order to properly cite his published work. Toward the end of the study, Melek published a book of his original poems under the name Kevin Coval and this work will be cited throughout the study. While I want to give credit to the name under which the work is published, it is equally important to stress the importance of "Melek Yonin." Much of his working out of his own identity is captured in the tension between the "government name," Kevin, and the Hebrew name, Melek. In one conversation about this tension, he characterized his internal debate about which name to use as "a struggle." This is due, in large part, to the fact that Melek claims that hip-hop was the exclusive channel through which he reconciled himself with Judaism. This is discussed at length below.

and their willingness to include me in their day suggested they were offering friendship as well as participation.

The conference, Melek's readiness to work with me, and the other artists I met that day were the beginning of my experiential understanding of the culture's communal sense. From that time forward, I was introduced to dozens of people who Melek thought might benefit the study, including Dove Rock who eventually became a third focus along with Melek and Idris. It was this introduction to a segment of Chicago's underground scene that first began to foreground particular characteristics of the culture. The conference was a manifestation of internal dialogue and critique, one of hip-hop's most animating features. In all the panel discussions, workshops, even the keynote address, there was an emphasis on conversation between panelists, between workshop facilitators and attendees, and between keynote speakers and audience members in a way that set it apart from other conferences or meetings in which the line between presenter or speaker and audience is more clearly marked.

### ***Parrhesia* and Personal Risk**

Part and parcel of the kind of dialogue that happens in hip-hop culture and was evidenced by the conference is a related animating feature of hip-hop articulated in one of its oldest mantras, "keepin' it real," which is the linguistic kin of "say it plain" from Black homiletics. Like most hip-hop apothegms, "keepin' it real" is not strictly defined but is *felt* and experienced on an affective level. When it is operating alongside dialogue this sentiment signifies a stripped down, raw and frank kind of speech free from the constraint of a conservative convention of propriety and tact. "Keepin' it real" does not

connote rudeness or insensitivity, but rather the kind of plain speech that might be captured by the ancient Greek idea of *parrhesia*. According to Cornel West, *parrhesia* is “fearless speech ... that unsettles, unnerves, and unhouses people from their uncritical sleepwalking.”<sup>9</sup> For West, *parrhesia* is part of a Socratic commitment to courageous opposition (in the case of Socrates, to the sophists) found in his claim from Plato’s *Apology* (24a), “Plain speech is the cause of my unpopularity.”

Kristen Kennedy, in her discussion of the use of *parrhesia* by the Cynics, claims that, “Despite its multiple uses and changing contexts, *parrhesia* generally means freedom of speech, the practice of frank and open discourse.”<sup>10</sup> This reading of *parrhesia* meshes well with Cornel West’s conception of *parrhesia* as “plain, frank speech” aimed at unsettling and unnerving for the purposes of providing the “lifeblood of any democracy.”<sup>11</sup> Kennedy’s discussion of *parrhesia* is especially instructive when considering the notion as a central, animating feature of hip-hop culture. In addition to defining it as a kind of freedom of speech or frank speech, Kennedy assigns to the Cynic *parrhesiast* the description of “one who speaks openly and at great risk” and also one who “creates the space to speak out.”<sup>12</sup> It is difficult to imagine a more appropriate notion to describe the dialogue within hip-hop as speaking frankly at great risk, and the creating of space for speaking out are fundamental ideas in the culture. Hip-hop artists are taught through the cultural milieu (and often through explicit instruction) to tell their own stories with a kind of openness and frankness that lays bare the possibility of

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<sup>9</sup> Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*, (New York: Penguin, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Kristen Kennedy, “Cynic Rhetoric: The Ethics and Tactics of Resistance,” *Rhetoric Review*, Vol.18, No.1 (Autumn, 1999), 33.

<sup>11</sup> Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*, (New York: Penguin, 2004), 19, 209.

<sup>12</sup> Kristen Kennedy, “Cynic Rhetoric: The Ethics and Tactics of Resistance,” *Rhetoric Review*, Vol.18, No.1 (Autumn, 1999), 27.

personal risk. Indeed, performing in front of an audience with such plainness carries with it an inherent emotional risk.<sup>13</sup> Dove Rock talks about the kind of vulnerability involved in telling personal narratives through art.

**Dove:** I find it a lot easier to write music with a political agenda [as opposed to personal narratives] ... the personal stuff is 100% me ... And I think also there's a lot more risk involved. You have to have a certain level of trust with your audience ... if I'm talking about something that's really personal, for somebody to criticize that, it can be really difficult.

**KK:** And that experience of having a personal experience or narrative feels different than a political message being criticized?

**Dove:** Oh yeah, definitely. And I think that does have a little bit to do with the fact that in a political arena you have reinforcements. Generally you have people standing behind your beliefs [but] with personal issues, it's just you ... it's your own battle.

The vulnerability inherent in laying bare one's personal issues through art has a kind of double effect when the art is performed and Dove is tuned into this layered vulnerability of self-examination manifested in artistic creation and the risk of performing the result.

**Dove:** [I'm] trying to convince the audience that I'm experiencing these feelings at the time I'm performing, trying to put myself in the place that I was when I wrote that particular piece [but] with the political songs it's a little bit easier to do that because, like I said, you feel the sense of having

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<sup>13</sup> I have witnessed students as young as 13 tell deeply personal stories through their spoken word performances and the emotional investment and risk is often obvious. During a spoken word competition I was judging, an African-American teenager told the story of the moment she found out that her brother had been shot by her ex-boyfriend. The personal risk she took in performing the piece was palpable.



backup ... but with the more personal stuff, I think, it's another area of vulnerability, you know what I mean? Not only are the things you're saying exposing a very vulnerable side of yourself, but now you're also displaying what that feels like, if that makes sense.

**KK:** Like you're naked on two different levels?

**Dove:** You're naked on two different levels, yeah.

This multi-layered vulnerability, rooted in the idea of keepin' it real/*parrhesia* is so foundational to hip-hop culture that it transcends its status as mantra to become in no small part constitutive of the very identity of the artists. Melek Yonin often talks about the idea that hip-hop “demands” of its participants that they “represent,” which for Melek means telling their own personal stories and therefore opening themselves to the kind of vulnerability involved in articulating those stories with the additional layer of risk added through performing them. Melek's own identity is bound up with an idea he attributes to one of his personal inspirations, Chicago poet Gwendolyn Brooks, of “telling the story that's in front of your nose.” For Melek, this is sometimes the story of local Chicago realities including the social miseries that come from institutionalized racism, hyper-privatization, and gentrification. These are certainly part of the stories in front of his nose. Sometimes he writes and tells the stories of everyday people, ostensibly ordinary lives that become extraordinary through what he often refers to as “the poetic imagination.” But more than that, the story in front of his nose is a story about himself, and this story is replete with his working out, grappling with, and embracing his Jewish heritage. It often involves the telling of deeply personal family events and conversations as in the piece, “family feud.”

my mother's voice rises  
like defense shields when i ask if she wants  
my daughter to be murdered by bombs  
built of self-delusion

my father screams  
fists thru my face when i mention  
this new war aids right wing rhetoric  
and maybe the government is involved  
in ways known secret books from now

my grandfather gone three years, returns  
between john wayne AMC marathons  
george m. cohan in front of a dead tv  
tells me ike and mcarthur are patriots  
i should leave this country if i won't  
lay truth down for it

my Uncle Steven  
thirty years earlier took manuscripts to manhattan  
moved office mail and furniture, bike messengered  
in the dusk of empire, left wife and german Shepard  
sister, brother and Mother Ellie, draft dodged and drugged  
rather than continue scraping knuckles against his father's  
nearsightedness

my family says i remind them of him  
every time i open my mouth and dream<sup>14</sup>

Here we see that the risk and vulnerability involved in the artistic revealing of intimate, personal (and in this case familial) dynamics and experiences are a part of keepin' it real for Melek. This is so because the hip-hop aesthetic calls for such personal vulnerability. It is a prodigious part of what drew Melek to hip-hop in the first place. The idea is that in the best of hip-hop culture, there is no disconnect between the self and the art. The hip-hop aesthetic is contrasted with what Melek calls "a white aesthetic" and "a white politic." I once asked him about the differences between performing in front of predominantly white audiences and predominantly nonwhite audiences.

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<sup>14</sup> Kevin Coval, *Slingshots: A Hip-Hop Poetica* (Channahon, IL: EM Press, 2005).

**Melek:** I think I'll offend a lot more people in predominantly white audiences.

**KK:** Because?

**Melek:** Because the politic is not like a white politic. It's not a white aesthetic, it's not a white politic. It challenges those things. It pushes them and, like, punches them and makes people uncomfortable. It says things that people who look like me probably shouldn't say in their [the audience's] mind. Certainly I say things that Jews in dominant cultural consciousness should not be saying.

**KK:** Such as?

**Melek:** I believe in the state of Palestine. I believe that Israel is participating in white colonialism, that Jews have been steadily participating in white colonialism, have paid the price of the ticket in order to assimilate and be safe here but we have lost so much along the way, you know, and it's a tragedy. It's a tragedy because we don't know who we are anymore and it's a tragedy because we're practicing the techniques of our master.

**KK:** You say that shit in the synagogue?

**Melek:** Yeah

**KK and Melek:** [laugh]

**Melek:** That's probably why I don't get invited to too many

**KK:** What's a white aesthetic?

**Melek:** It's a kind of pseudo-objectivity that white sociologists and ethnographers and novelists have maintained where they don't think that they exist within their words. They try to limit themselves within their words but by doing so they inevitably, they're present but like whiteness they are present by their absence. Everything and nothing. A white aesthetic tries desperately not to think about who the author is.

In addition to the insightful comments about whiteness, Melek's ideas here show us that by contrast the hip-hop aesthetic is one in which the artists do "exist within their words" or their performances. This means that, similar to critical qualitative researchers, hip-hop artists know that their work is always, to some degree or another, about them.<sup>15</sup> It is the *knowing* that the self exists in the words/works of the artist that separates a hip-hop aesthetic from the so-called white aesthetic. Hip-hop, instead of grasping for an elusive objectivity, acknowledges, embraces, and often celebrates the presence of the self within each of its expressions and for Melek the self is in part constituted by this notion that he exists within his words. Therefore there is a dynamic relationship between the idea that the self is present in the art and Melek's reconstructions of self that are dependent on the hip-hop aesthetic. Put another way, the *parrhesiast* in Melek is a result of the working out of the self through a hip-hop aesthetic that acknowledges the presence of self in its articulations such that *parrhesia* operates simultaneously as medium and outcome of hip-

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<sup>15</sup> Phil Francis Carspecken, *Critical Ethnography in Educational Research : A Theoretical and Practical Guide, Critical Social Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1996), Phil Francis Carspecken, *Four Scenes for Posing the Question of Meaning and Other Essays in Critical Philosophy and Critical Methodology* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), Norman K. Denzin, *Performance Ethnography : Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003), Norman K. Denzin, Yvonna S. Lincoln, and NetLibrary Inc., *The Landscape of Qualitative Research Theories and Issues* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE, 1998).

hop culture. This also means that *parrehesia* describes both a cultural value in hip-hop and an aesthetic sensibility.

### ***Parrhesia* and Political Risk**

There is another kind of risk for the *parrhesiast* in addition to the vulnerability involved in confronting, writing, telling, and performing revealing personal stories. Kennedy discusses the overtly political use of *parrhesia* by the Cynics to “speak openly to leaders and others with power to note their hypocrisies and abuses.”<sup>16</sup> This kind of *parrhesia* also operates in hip-hop and carries with it a different kind of risk. When spoken word artists or MCs use *parrhesia* as political or socio-cultural criticism, they run the risk of alienating or offending portions of their audience through their frankness and also of becoming targets of the hegemonies they criticize. Yet, hip-hoppers are taught through the culture to keep it real which is a simultaneous encouragement to dispose of the kind of filtering that mainstream American culture typically invokes when the subject matter is harsh and upsetting or disturbing and incensing (see the contrast between Gwen Ifill’s and Kanye West’s delivery) even though its targets may be powerful or influential individuals or institutions.

As an example of this kind of risk, Melek Yonin wrote and performed several poems in the controversial aftermath of Mel Gibson’s film, *The Passion of The Christ*. Melek’s response included caustic criticism of Gibson’s film mostly in the context of defending Melek’s own Jewish heritage. One such poem, “The Bitch in You: *for mel gibson*,” elicited this response from Michael Eric Dyson: “... [that was] raw, straight no

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<sup>16</sup> Kristen Kennedy, “Cynic Rhetoric: The Ethics and Tactics of Resistance,” *Rhetoric Review*, Vol.18, No.1 (Autumn, 1999), 33.

chaser. That's the real lethal weapon right there."<sup>17</sup> In this piece, Melek uses moments of comic relief to play off of the more acrimonious passages, yet even the comic elements are part of a whole that is scathing and unrelenting. The piece begins,

if you really want to talk about it  
(and I think you don't)

let's start with your conquistador Australian aboriginal killin  
afrikaans apartheid separatist evangelical klansmen crusade

your alcoholic rapist phallocentric lethal weapon  
forced into temples of bubbes, abulitas, and granmammamas  
in every continent you ever got lost on

you pompous pilot  
roman bathhouse closing closet fascist third reich memorabilia  
collecting dick sucker like Hoover damn cointelpro Hollywood  
mkkkarthy blacklist Robeson jew-baiting pinko commy snitch

In the wake of Gibson's *The Passion of The Christ*, plenty of rabbis and other Jewish leaders could be found articulating their disappointment in the offensive anti-Semitic tone of the film on cable news network shows. Even the most brazen of these opponents of the film did not come close to *keeping it as real* as Melek does in his piece. He continues by switching from the personal critique to a sophisticated analysis of Gibson's film followed by an outright assault on Gibson's rejection of Vatican II Catholicism,

you steadily been revising history  
only got libeled kings' accounts of what happened  
journals and gospels of war captains and capitalists  
first hand records lost like ashes in smoke stacked ovens  
indistinguishable body parts in mass graves

your church is full of shit and martyrs beatified after you killed them  
this is not to mention Lumumba and Malcolm, Medgar and Emmett  
the 6 million, gypsies and homosexuals, Galileo, all the strike leaders  
the Harolds and Hamptons, Lozanos you can't Lazarus, this is not to mention  
crusades and inquisitions, missionary slave shackles with biblical justifications

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<sup>17</sup> See front matter of Coval, *Slingshots: A Hip-Hop Poetica*.

american presidents enacting end time scenarios with the lives of poor kids  
sent to stand in front of the missiles and die for the cross (i mean flag)<sup>18</sup>

Though there is much in this piece that would be taken as crass and offensive by some, the very point for the *parrhesiast* and for the prophetic voice in hip-hop culture is to unsettle and unnerve those who oppress and marginalize as well as those who would sympathize with the oppressors and with those who marginalize through an unwillingness to point out hypocrisy in plain and frank language, or those who might choose instead to use a more filtered language of criticism that takes the bite (and in the eyes of hip-hop culture, the “realness” and perhaps effectiveness) out of caustic messages like the one in Melek’s “love song for mel,” as he calls it. The piece is indicative of *parrhesia* as part of an aesthetic sensibility in hip-hop and beyond that, the *performance* of this caustic criticism is an indicator of the place *parrhesia* has in constructions of self in the culture. Melek’s identity is bound up in the demand of the hip-hop aesthetic to tell his story even when the story brims with a kind of rage that makes audiences uncomfortable. So tied to his identity is Melek’s sense of prophetic voice/*parrhesia* that he did not hesitate to perform a series of pieces attacking white supremacy that included a few “love songs for mel” and specifically, “The Bitch in You: *for mel gibson*,” at a local, predominantly white *Catholic* university! This courageous move was accompanied by an introduction by Melek in which he asserted his Jewish heritage and pointedly, yet somehow punctiliously, invited his largely Catholic audience to give his trenchant criticism a fair hearing. An identity partially constituted by this sense of prophetism, articulated through the aesthetic sensibilities of the culture result in Melek taking such profuse risks as this.

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<sup>18</sup> From an unpublished set of poems entitled, *Whiteboy Down*.

This political risk that Kennedy claims the Cynics enacted through leveling frank speech at the hypocrisy of leaders and those in power finds congruence with Cornel West's "tracking hypocrisy" component of prophetic thought. Melek's *parrhesia* certainly takes the form of tracking hypocrisy of individuals and institutions of power and, like West's notion, it functions with a self-critical component as well. The criticisms of Mel Gibson's Catholicism are joined in Melek's corpus by pieces that reflectively target his own religious heritage, as in the daring piece, "no better."<sup>19</sup>

we know better  
have known bitter  
each year marror  
matzah sandwiches of affliction  
parsley slave tears/late night exodus  
we fled all of europe/first blamed  
hid secrets in our shoes/diaspora  
culture where we populate/infiltrate  
assimilate/the world's finest chameleons  
we could look light/white/like hosts  
walk into diners after sunsets and order bacon  
new names to pass/knew the new deal/the steal  
tucked between legs trembling before shiksa infidelities<sup>20</sup>

The repetition of the collective first-person pronoun is both an explicit indication of the presence of the self within the art and an embodiment of the prophetic pragmatist notion of tracking hypocrisy, specifically the self-critical moment of locating oneself within a particular hypocrisy. This piece rises to a poignant crescendo with a refrain at the end in which the playing with "know better/no better" becomes less of a device and more of an explicit, opprobrious internal audit of his own people.

no better  
than roman emperors  
crusade leaders

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<sup>19</sup> Coval, *Slingshots: A Hip-Hop Poetica*.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 63.



knesset klansmen

no better	than sharonian war criminals
	arafatian castro infidels
	imperial ghetto kings
no better	than rabid hand puppets
	golden calf slum lords
	genocidal amnesiacs
no better	than christians
no better	than white men
	than nuevo fascists
	than a million mccarthyites
no better	than syrian armies
	than suicide bombers
	than arab holocaust deniers
no better	than blind shepards
no better	than cain <sup>21</sup>

Each of the artists in this study, in her or his own style, both embodies and produces work that incorporates the prophetic/*parrhesiast* notion of using frank speech to confront the abuses of those in power. To different degrees, they each bring critique to bear on large, formal governments (particularly the U.S.). They also engage the notion of the politics of the personal through their critical artistic expression. Both Idris and Dove have written and performed songs to this effect. Idris's song, "Mr. Hipster," though arguably less abrasive and emotionally charged than Melek Yonin's "The Bitch in You: *for mel gibson*," still effectively enacts the *parrhesiast's* mode of unfiltered, direct critique without regard for the political risk involved. Here, Idris takes on the hipster journalist art critic. This is a distinct theme in his work and it comes up routinely in conversation. While Melek's targets are likely to be social and political hegemony,

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 64.

Idris's *parrhesia* is often aimed at what he perceives to be self-interested criticism and commentary on his (and others') art. The chorus of the piece directly addresses a generic, self-interested critic.

Hey there Mr. hipster  
Why don't you come define these lines I draw  
Just take your brilliant ink  
and make me sink to the bottom  
Then bring me back up

PBR crack another as you attack a brother  
Miss the point  
Mistake make another

About

Exactly what I do and make reference to<sup>22</sup>

Here we see for the first time a stylistic distinction in Idris's use of humor within the critique. Specifically, this comedic criticism is aimed at those with whom Idris finds fault for writing contemporary art criticism that misunderstands its object in part because there is often an attempt by the critic to promote herself with lofty language and exposition at the expense of an accurate understanding and evaluation of the art. "Mr. Hipster's" last verse is another comedic confrontation of this kind of self-absorbed journalism and failure to understand hip-hop.

We call this thing hip hop  
One, twos and the don't stops  
Don't got no big club house  
Some need to get kicked out  
It's a plain fact/ that power gotta get took back  
why I'm 'posed to listen to Brian Nemtusak  
jockin zev love x but he'd probably diss you  
you aint hear peach-fuzz till the kmd reissue  
Who got the biggest verbs?  
whose got the biggest words?

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<sup>22</sup> Idris Goodwin, *Idris Goodwin* (chicago: naivete records, 2004).

it's a one legged race to see who's the biggest nerd<sup>23</sup>

This direct confrontation with those in power certainly embodies a different mood than Melek's more astringent tone, yet the frankness and direct confrontation is there and is again bound up in the identity of the artist. "Mr. Hipster" reflects Idris's artistic heritage and influences.

**Idris:** [responding to a question about the direction of his art in the future]

My sense of humor is a huge part of who I am and a huge part of what I think will be unique about me as a voice. And some of my fucking biggest influences and heroes are comics.

The *parrhesia* in Idris's work naturally emerges through this comedic influence, and the prophetism in his voice and corpus is colored with the humor of the comics that influenced his aesthetic sensibilities. But the common ground that is shared by all three artists is that their reconstructions of self are informed by the *parrhesia*/prophetism of hip-hop aesthetics, and, in turn, the self that is so informed influences the art that is produced so that both the identity of the artist and the art are organically tied to *parrhesia*/prophetism even while particular artistic sensibilities may differ from artist to artist.

In one interview, Idris began to work out the idea that labeling and defining a particular artistic sensibility diminishes its power and mystery, as in trying to define "the blues" or hip-hop. He suggested that those who want to compose and apply particular definitions to the sensibilities within hip-hop culture are like the self-interested journalists in that their analyses become more self-promotion than anything else and at the same

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

time their definitions and labels, in effect, are too narrow to capture fully the essence of the culture, if there is such a thing. Because of this Idris prefers more informal and sometimes visceral responses to the art such as, “that was dope!”

**KK:** But “dope” doesn’t really capture what it is – like when you label it something?

**Idris:** Yeah, it’s like “X” but like “dope” being “X,” the unknown, it shows more respect for that thing by not trying to say, [mocking highbrow critical tone] “Yeah, what it is, it’s a pastiche ... what you’re doing is transforming the pain of your people. It’s the rage, Black rage personified ...” you know what I mean? That’s fucking irritating. When people come up to me and they’re like, “yo man, that shit was cold, man ... you sick, you a beast,” that means a lot because it has such an effect you can’t even really put it into words. To me that’s more flattering than like [mocking tone again] “Goodwin comes from a long tradition of battle-scarred griots,” it’s like, what the fuck are you talking about? Just shut up because that’s not about me, that’s about you. That’s about you trying to sound a certain way. That’s about you trying to align yourself in a way with what it is – I mean, I’m not saying – I’m obviously going to an extreme in this regard. Flattery is great. But, to me, it almost takes away from the unknown part of “that shit was dope!”

We see again Idris’s comedic style in the foreground of this comment, but it constitutes a comedic *parrhesia* nonetheless. He wonders aloud about whether or not his direct confrontation with the highbrow analyses that he mocks prohibits him from being in the

right frame to mind for obtaining grants for the production of his art. But, ultimately, the hip-hop aesthetic informs Idris's identity with its prophetic sense and *parrhesiast* disposition such that Idris must keep it real when it comes to confronting those who would seek to label and define what Idris views as resisting definition beyond, "that was dope!" and other more immediate, felt responses.

Idris's distinct way of working out his *parrhesia* with humor is matched by Dove Rock's particular prophetic voice that manifests itself in confrontation of gender oppression. She has thought and reflected deeply about gender issues in general and gender and hip-hop in particular. It stands to reason that in a culture dominated by men and containing pockets of patriarchy and misogyny, a female artist would necessarily grapple with gender issues and Dove has certainly done so in sophisticated ways. So entrenched is the masculinity within hip-hop that even some of the more "conscious" artists in terms of politics or social ills have been known to express patriarchal and misogynist lyrics and messages.

**Dove:** [in a discussion about hip-hop and misogyny] I had The Roots "Things Fall Apart" album and maybe like a month after it came out I read this interview with them and um, they had called themselves like self-proclaimed bitch pullers or something like that and after I read that I just gave it away – or I threw it out. I got rid of it regardless and I've never bought another Roots album since.

So, Dove's *parrhesia* that confronts those in power has as its target those misogynists and patriarchs within the culture. Her song, "estrogen" has all the ingredients (perhaps

even in the title itself) of risk that a *parrhesiast* takes with regard to a prospective audience.

Phallic keys tell fallacies to unlock chastities  
Bubblegum pop love songs as pubescent unsung  
rhapsodies  
The centaur flees to trample cherry trees in teenage  
tragedies  
while Venus slits her wrists with blades of inadequacy

Words laced with hate disguised as flattery  
She's the energizer playboy bunny of the verbal  
battery  
She's a body first before mind  
cursed to pace to rythems set in King James time  
Bleeding for Eve she dies ribless  
There's mountains peaking in her dress  
Baptisms in her uterus  
Her sister slid into urethras and got lost  
Her mother Lilith, being nailed to an x-chromosome  
cross  
Pink Y-me ribbons serve as nuses for the cause  
Wasn't it Father Freedom who wrapped Lady Justice's  
eyes with gauze?

Where do I belong  
Where do I belong?  
Between a sanitary pad and an erogenous zone  
Where do I belong  
when estrogen drowns in a teaspoon of testosterone  
estrogen drowns in a teaspoon of testosterone<sup>24</sup>

Dove has performed this piece in many male-dominated settings. Her peers and her audience are largely male. No doubt Dove is aware during the writing and performing process that those who experience a song such as “estrogen” will be overwhelmingly male and it is likely that in every performance setting, given the misogynist and patriarchal segments of the hip-hop community, that some in her audience will be hostile to the ideas so directly confronted by the piece. However, much

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<sup>24</sup> Dove Rock, *Sylvia Plath Easybake Oven* (Chicago: iron vagina records, 2005).

like Melek and his trenchant criticisms of Mel Gibson's Catholicism performed at a Catholic university and like Idris's comedic criticisms of the very journalists and analysts that have the power to recommend his work to the public (or not), Dove's identity is too much bound up in the hip-hop aesthetic that promotes the prophetic voice despite the risk to ease up on her raw descriptions of female experience regardless (or perhaps because) of the makeup of her audience.

In interviews, Dove talks about the frustrations of being an artist in a genre so colonized by men. This frustration does not necessarily seem to discourage her in general and it certainly does not discourage her from writing songs that meet the patriarchy in hip-hop head-on. She is acutely aware of how gender operates in the culture.

**Dove:** sometimes when I meet new people and they're not familiar with what I do and they ask, "Well, what do you do?" and I say, "Well, I'm an MC," sometimes they're like, "Oh really? Rhyme." You know. And it's like, "What do *you* do?" You know, plumbing? You wanna go fix me a toilet?

**KK:** (laughs) right

**Dove:** and that's really annoying. And equally annoying are the people who give me like this "honorary penis" or "she's dope, she's female and she rhymes and she's dope." And it's like, so what? You know what I mean?

**KK:** Right. So you find people either expressing some sort of doubt that you have skills like “Okay, rhyme if you’re an MC.” Or, if they recognize that you’ve got skills it’s like you’ve got man skills or something like that.

**Dove:** Sometimes, sometimes. Some people, I mean there’s a couple of people who’ve been good about that but there have been a number of shows that I’ve been introduced as “the dopest female MC” ... and I would rather be considered a very good MC ...

**KK:** Because it implies that any female MC is inferior to any male MC.

**Dove:** Right, totally, it’s like giving us our own category ...

The way the *parrhesia*/prophetism manifests itself in Dove’s work is through a kind of feminist education for her peers and audience that is likely to be somewhat ignorant of or perhaps hostile to the female experience. Since the culture is so male-driven the voices telling stories from a female perspective are usually found on the margins of any segment of the culture but Dove is aware of the necessity to speak with that voice.

**Dove:** My writing is based on my life experiences and my thoughts and, you know, being a woman I definitely have a lot of experiences that I feel the need to talk about like “estrogen” like, that song is basically just about what it’s like to be a woman and like misogyny and ... I have mostly male friends and like, while I love my friends to death it never ceases to amaze me how absolutely oblivious they are to [the female experience].

**KK:** Right.



**Dove:** You know, to walk down the street and not be harassed, you know? That's a privilege.

## Creating Space

Kristen Kennedy's notion of the Cynic *parrhesiast* creating space to speak out finds much congruence with hip-hop culture. Creating the space to speak openly has been a part of hip-hop since the days of the Creation Myth of Kool Herc in the Bronx when early hip-hop parties were precisely a seizing of public space and eventually a stealing of electricity. To this day, carving out space for expression is an animating feature of the culture.<sup>25</sup> The specific ways in which the creation of space manifests itself in hip-hop culture is well rehearsed most notably in Chang (2005), Forman (2002), Forman and Neal (2004), and Perry (2004). For the purposes of this study, it is important to note that such space creation connected to the idea of speaking out in a frank manner constitutes a form of *parrhesia* as described by Kennedy. Additionally, it will be important to get clear about how this kind of *parrhesia* is viewed and treated by the subjects of this study.

Melek is very much tuned into the creation of space in hip-hop. His sense of this feature of hip-hop culture is strongly connected to the idea that hip-hop is the artistic creation of the abandoned and the forgotten.

**Melek:** You know, one time I heard Cornel West say that hip-hop is the articulation of "the latch key kids." Plain and simple. So, and he said, regardless of if it's urban, suburban, white, Black, Latino, whatever, it's

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<sup>25</sup> Murray Forman, *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop, Music/Culture* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2002).

the generation of latch key kids that created the music. You know, it's kids whose parents were working or not, but would come home and have the after school time to do whatever they imagined, you know. And, my brother and I were latch key kids and we invented not hip-hop, but we invented crazy games by ourselves, you know, we'd play stickball behind the Ace Hardware and use their sod bags as bases and imagine ourselves as Darryl Strawberry and Doc Gooden ... So, I think, in some ways, why does hip-hop get created? It's kinda the next expression of a soul music, it's a post-industrial soul music. So, you take the relics of, I mean you have like, forgotten cities, you have the South Bronx is the ultimate metaphor for forgotten, abandoned, you know, "white flight" urban America. You know, but you have this articulation of that experience. The bass in someone's car is the insistence on being seen, as is the graff-tag, as is breaking on the street ... I don't know, it's just all these things that are forgotten and I think my experience in the suburbs was a forgotten experience. It's something that is discarded as well by popular culture or dominant culture. It's not what you hear about in the suburbs and, of course, the urban experience, period, and then the South Bronx experience specifically is not heard about in the popular dominant cultural consciousness either. And so, there's something about that ... I was left out as well – and in different ways, but for some of the same reasons that [DJ Kool] Herc, other people are also left out.

The personal “forgotten” experience to which Melek refers is of a working class Jewish family trying to keep its financial head above water in the middle of a white collar suburb of Chicago. Melek’s suburban experience is not similar to typical suburban stories, and it is this experience that, at least in part, is responsible for his felt connection with hip-hop culture.

**Melek:** In the suburbs we had a kinda like a, you know, there’s multiple experiences in the suburbs and we had kinda like an “other side of the track” type experience, you know. Me, my mom, and my brother, ‘cause my parents were divorced when I was seven years old, and then, you know, we moved in the suburb nine times just evading landlords, not being able to pay rent here or there. And because my mom wanted to keep us in the school system so we could get a good education. I saw friends who lived in, you know, these huge mansions, rocked new Jordans all the time, drove cars at 16 and so on and so forth. And, I don’t know, there was an economic inequity that I saw early, that I experienced early that hip-hop in some ways was beginning to articulate. And of course mine was class and they were also talking about race and class, you know. For some reason, there was a correlation. Even though it’s dominantly Black men in the South Bronx ... talking about class and economic, racial inequity. You know there was something about my experience that I think, I was also like, “Okay. Word.” You know and I feel those sentiments. I haven’t lived that life by any means, but I feel those sentiments.

## Discursive Activism

Additionally, according to Kennedy, the Cynics use of *parrhesia* could also be “extended to an imperative of discursive activism.”<sup>26</sup> Hip-hop is seething with this kind of *parrhesia* and it takes but a cursory glance at the emergent body of hip-hop scholarship (or a listen to some recordings of “conscious” MCs) to unveil the discursive activism in the culture.<sup>27</sup> Much of this kind of activism in hip-hop follows yet another line in Kennedy’s assessment of the Cynic *parrhesiast*. In summing up her evaluation of Cynic *parrhesia*, Kennedy claims that it “called attention to unjust rhetorical contexts by highlighting those who were not invited to speak and then speaking in these places.”<sup>28</sup> Specifically for spoken word/hip-hop artists, this kind of activism on behalf of the marginalized is a familiar component of the culture. Melek Yonin’s corpus (as well as the work of other hip-hop artists in Chicago) reflects this. In an early interview I conducted with Melek, he recalled his days in a suburban white high school when he began to engage in the plain, frank speech he learned about through hip-hop.<sup>29</sup>

**Melek:** I think I really didn’t like my English or history teacher, you know? So this is like sophomore or junior year of high school and I, like they were giving us this kinda white bread, Eurocentric curriculum and at that point I think, I had, I read Malcolm’s autobiography my sophomore

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<sup>26</sup> Kristen Kennedy, “Cynic Rhetoric: The Ethics and Tactics of Resistance,” *Rhetoric Review*, Vol.18, No.1 (Autumn, 1999), 36.

<sup>27</sup> See especially Chang (2005) and Forman and Neal (2004).

<sup>28</sup> Kristen Kennedy, “Cynic Rhetoric: The Ethics and Tactics of Resistance,” *Rhetoric Review*, Vol.18, No.1 (Autumn, 1999), 37.

<sup>29</sup> The story of Melek’s high school experience bears on his connection with hip-hop. He describes it as an “other side of the tracks” experience (in a economic sense) because he went to a suburban high school in which the majority of students came from affluent families, while Melek was moving around from one apartment complex to the other as his single mother struggled to make rent, trying to keep her sons in “good schools.”

year and then Lerone Bennett, Jr.'s *History Before the Mayflower* [sic] I think in my junior year ... Was exposed to Baldwin, I think, my junior year. And then I think my senior year, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez. And it opened up a canon. So I knew that, I mean, the first day of my U.S. history class my junior year, all I saw was white men on the wall. The first time I got the book I went quickly to see what was gonna be talked about in terms of other forms of, er, other stories within, you know, the kind of white American narrative. And there was about two pages about slavery and then there was like *a* paragraph literally about what they called, "the black revolt" and they had a picture of Martin Luther King. And I couldn't believe it and so right away I kinda began to try to battle my history t--, I mean I raised my hand and I'm like, "Why are there only white men on this wall and this is a U.S. history class?" And I just started writing essays that were super angry and like I was trying to, like I had heard about the battles and I don't think I was conscious about, "Word, I'm gonna battle my English teacher, I'm gonna battle my history teacher."

These confrontations with teachers over a Eurocentric curriculum certainly amounted to significant risks for Melek. He further described his teachers' reactions to his "battling" them.

**Melek:** Oh, they hated me. I mean, I got kicked out of class all the time. I'd get bad grades. I think that they were, I mean, 'cause I was coming *at them*. I wasn't trying to make this argument around what they were

saying. I was like, “*You*, Mr. Rofholter or whoever the fuck you are, are *wack!* This is why ...” You know? How can you teach us about such and such and not give us the full story? Why are we only covering, you know, why are we, you know, whoever my English teacher was, you know, why do we only read Edgar Allen Poe? And whatever other dead white dude you wanna ... And so, I don’t think that they appreciated it.

Whether through the risk of personal vulnerability, the risk of direct confrontation with hegemons, the creation of space to speak out, or discursive activism, *parrhesia* is constitutive of what I am calling the prophetic voice in hip-hop, even as the idea of the prophetic remains an elusive concept as noted in chapter one. The *parrhesia* in hip-hop aesthetics gives voice to what West refers to as “prophetic thought” that operates within the culture (i.e., the example of Melek’s aesthetic sensibilities operating with West’s idea of “tracking hypocrisy”). I emphasize here that the *parrhesia*/prophetic voice is a part of *a hip-hop aesthetic* for the subjects of this study. This aesthetic is then both medium and outcome of reconstructions of self within the culture.

Related to the *parrhesia*/prophetism in hip-hop is the organic intellectualism with which several scholars and journalists have, mostly in passing, associated hip-hop artists. In what follows, I develop that association both theoretically and ethnographically. Here I point out that organic intellectualism in hip-hop is related to the hip-hop artist as *parrhesiast* in two ways. First, both are of extreme importance when considering the self-aesthetic relation of hip-hop artists. Second, they are related substantively in that the notion of voice is essential to both and so it follows that voice is an important location of inquiry within hip-hop culture.

## Organic Intellectualism

While it can be argued that contemporary versions of the organic intellectual are in some ways continuous with Gramsci's original formulation, the idea is employed today in ways Gramsci did not and probably could not anticipate. Contemporary scholarship in a wide range of disciplines including sociology, cultural studies, and even ethnomusicology has stretched organic intellectualism into the postindustrial era, often adding additional modifiers to set a particular "brand" of organic intellectualism/Gramscianism apart from others (including the original version). Mark Anthony Neal identifies "Celebrity Gramscians" and "soul Gramscians"<sup>30</sup> in reference to politically trenchant/identity conscious rap and neo-soul artists. Jeffrey Louis Decker speaks of "organic *cultural* intellectuals" referring to Black Nationalist hip-hoppers.<sup>31</sup> These reformulations follow the trajectory of the meaning of organic intellectual that led scholars of the generation preceding Neal and Decker to hold up Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. as American embodiments of Gramsci's idea. In other words, the contemporary versions of organic intellectualism have been and currently are largely informed by African American scholarship, style, sensibilities, and the "Black aesthetic"(this term is used in this essay in a more general sense than The Black Aesthetic that is associated with The Black Arts Movement).<sup>32</sup> Further, the primary location for

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<sup>30</sup> Mark Anthony Neal, *Songs in the Key of Black Life: A Rhythm and Blues Nation*, (New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>31</sup> Jeffrey Louis Decker, "the state of rap: time and place in hip-hop nationalism," *Social Text*, 34 (1993), 53-84.

<sup>32</sup> I do not mean to suggest here that there is one pure cultural stream that produces this aesthetic. However, that does not prohibit the existence of a bounded set of aesthetic sensibilities that is primarily informed by and associated with people of African descent. This "Black aesthetic" is historically linked with Black arts movement figures such as Amiri Baraka. This movement grew out of the need for African American artists to produce a system of art criticism that did not depend on Western standards. See Sandra Govan, "The poetry of black experience as counterpoint to the poetry of the black aesthetic," *Negro American Literature Forum*, Vol. 8, No. 4. (Winter, 1974), 288-292. Or for an introduction to the more

today's version of the organic intellectual is found in hip-hop culture (what I refer to as the *postindustrial street intellectual*). Therefore, contemporary ideas about and contemporary embodiments of organic intellectualism are primarily informed by African American cultural sensibilities.

Here I reconsider organic intellectualism, in light of the claims above, by first examining the intersection of Gramsci's ideas and Cornel West's neopragmatism, followed by an exploration of hip-hop culture and its resident "intellectuals." These investigations naturally bump up against theoretical questions about what constitutes "doing philosophy," the transfer of knowledge, the legitimacy and/or limitations of popular cultural expression, all of which yield important conclusions for theorists who seek to understand better the present cultural moment and its relationship with educative processes.

### **Remaking Gramsci in the Image of Prophetic Pragmatism**

The currently privileged vocabulary for a position of intellectual engagement is taken from Gramsci, and it's his concept of the "organic intellectual." It's the term that has gained the greatest currency in the rhetoric of "oppositional criticism" but the difficulty is that it has been taken as such an ahistorical master concept. Which is ironic, because Gramsci was hailed by Marxist theorists in England as a corrective to the massively ahistorical tendencies of structural theorists.<sup>33</sup>

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

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recent version, see Trey Ellis, "the new black aesthetic," *Callaloo*, No. 38. (Winter, 1989), 233-243. Again, this essay employs a more general definition of the "Black aesthetic," albeit, one that is informed by the more specific rendering in these articles. Even more recently and related to the context of hip-hop, Imani Perry discusses the idea of claiming that hip-hop is Black music in a way that avoids essentializing it in *Prophets of the Hood : Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>33</sup> Charles H. Rowell, "An Interview with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.," *Callaloo*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Spring 1991), 457.



It is conceivable that Gates was thinking of his friend and former Harvard colleague, Cornel West, when he made these statements about the ahistorical use of Gramsci's organic intellectual. West is clearly well-versed in Gramsci's Marxism. He devotes a significant portion of *Prophesy Deliverance!* (1982) to Gramsci's ideas as he seeks to conjoin elements of the Marxist tradition with prophetic black Christianity.<sup>34</sup> Yet, on Gates's terms, West might seem guilty as charged. In his genealogy of American pragmatism that culminates in the articulation of his own neopragmatism, West reshapes Gramsci's ideas for his own purposes since Gramsci employed a

fluid Leninist conception of political organization and mobilization (which downplays the democratic and libertarian values of prophetic pragmatists) [and an] unswerving allegiance to sophisticated Marxist social theory (which is an indispensable yet ultimately inadequate weapon for prophetic pragmatists).<sup>35</sup>

West takes Gramscian notions of praxis, intellectualism, and culture, rids them of their elements that are incommensurable with prophetic pragmatism, and adopts them for his project. However, he challenges Gates's assertion by doing so with sophistication and accuracy. In other words, West is well aware of the historical specificity and the context of Gramsci's ideas, but his scholarship and thinking have penetrated the Marxist tradition and Gramsci in particular in such a way that he is able to navigate the historical specificity and appropriately draw out Gramscian ideas and insert them into the prophetic pragmatist program.

Gramsci's work provides a kind of balance that fits the aims of prophetic pragmatism. West highlights the foregrounding of culture, the unity of theory and

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<sup>34</sup> Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, (Westminster: Philadelphia, 1982).

<sup>35</sup> Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*, (University of Wisconsin: Madison, 1989), 231.

practice, and the political trenchancy in Gramsci. In fact, these ideas “inspire” prophetic pragmatism. Thus, he claims,

[Gramsci is] the major twentieth-century philosopher of praxis, power, and provocation without devaluing theory, adopting unidimensional conceptions of power, or reducing provocation to Clausewitzian calculations of warfare. Gramsci’s work is historically specific, theoretically engaging, and politically activist in an exemplary manner. His concrete and detailed investigations are grounded in and reflections upon local struggles, yet theoretically sensitive to structural dynamics and international phenomena.<sup>36</sup>

West also makes clear that prophetic pragmatism leans on Gramsci’s ideas about philosophy and its relationship with “common sense,” oppositional criticism, and the critical spirit. For this reason, West places emphasis on Gramsci’s conception of philosophical activity as “a cultural battle to transform the popular ‘mentality.’”<sup>37</sup> Additionally, West aligns himself with Gramsci’s ideas about the philosophical elite, claiming, “prophetic pragmatist sensibilities permit (or even encourage) this [Gramsci’s] rejection of the arrogant scientific self-privileging or haughty secular self-images of many modern philosophers and intellectuals.”<sup>38</sup>

West’s treatment and use of Gramsci’s ideas about philosophers and intellectuals are of primary concern here. In his earlier work West makes explicit and provocative connections between the organic intellectual and African American theologians. Again, in *Prophesy Deliverance!* West brings the Marxist tradition to bear on a critical analysis of black theology. Here he says that Black theologians “may find Gramsci’s conception of organic intellectuals helpful.”<sup>39</sup> He draws on the idea of the organic intellectual as a

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 348.

<sup>38</sup> Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*, (University of Wisconsin: Madison, 1989), 232.

<sup>39</sup> Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, (Westminster: Philadelphia, 1982), 121.

means to aid Black theologians in their quest for the products of African American culture that might contribute to what Gramsci refers to as a counter-hegemonic culture. West's most interesting assertion related to Black theologians and organic intellectualism is found in a footnote in which he claims, "Although he [Gramsci] completely misunderstands the nature of the radical potential of Afro-American culture and Afro-American intellectuals, this does not harm his theoretical formulation of the notion of organic intellectuals."<sup>40</sup> In turn, despite what Henry Louis Gates's comments suggest, West's application of the notion does not harm it either. Organic intellectuals on Gramsci and West's terms are directly tied to and organically involved with a particular cultural group. They "combine theory and action, and relate popular culture and religion to structural social change."<sup>41</sup>

West's treatment of Gramsci and of organic intellectualism in particular foregrounds that which gives the ideas most meaning for counter-hegemonic minded African Americans. In *Prophesy Deliverance!* he particularly targets Black theologians, and in the subsequent essay, "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual," he adds another location for the application of Gramsci's notion.<sup>42</sup> This time, instead of using the idea of the organic intellectual to inspire (as in his adoption of it into prophetic pragmatism) or as a lens through which an intended audience might view its counter-hegemonic struggle (as in the convergence of Marxism and Black theology), West employs organic intellectualism to *describe* phenomena within black culture.

I would suggest that there are two *organic* intellectual traditions in African-American life: *the black Christian tradition of preaching and the black musical*

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 171, 172.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 121.

<sup>42</sup> Cornel West, "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, No. 2 (Winter, 1993-1994), 59-67.

*tradition of performance*. Both traditions, though undoubtedly linked to the life of the mind, are oral, improvisational, and histrionic. Both traditions are rooted in black life . . . (emphasis in original)<sup>43</sup>

Here West uses Gramsci's term (without referencing Gramsci) as a descriptor for traditions in African American culture. His explanation of conceiving these traditions as rooted in organic intellectualism rely on his reformulations of Gramsci found in *The American Evasion of Philosophy* and *Prophesy Deliverance!*. Taken together, these reformulations and descriptions suggest that organic intellectualism is today shaped by and embodied in African American life. Further, the connection between organic intellectualism and the Black musical performance tradition clearly sets the table for a more specific discussion of hip-hop culture and its intellectuals.

### **Postindustrial Street Intellectuals**

A number of different kinds of organic intellectuals can be found in the complexity of hip-hop culture. Each kind can be related to Gramscian ideas, and each can be seen as connected to Cornel West's treatment of Gramsci. Ultimately all varieties of hip-hop intellectuals can be described by the phrase *postindustrial street intellectuals*. "Postindustrial" describes both the historic moment and the hegemonic forces at play, including those that elicited the initial hip-hop response in the South Bronx. "Street" indicates both the literal location of the hip-hop intellectual and it suggests the general salience of place in hip-hop culture. The "street," or predominantly Black and Latino neighborhood/ghetto, public space, is the primary place of inspiration, imagination, and knowledge transfer within hip-hop; thus icons can be characterized as having more or less "street cred"(ibility). "Street" is important to hip-hop also because the fluid nature of

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 61.

its vernacular and style requires constant knowledge transfer. Because the street is the primary location for the passing along of knowledge about issues the culture deems important, it becomes an appropriate part of the description of the hip-hop organic intellectual. These ideas were exemplified by Public Enemy's Chuck D. when he claimed in the late 1980s that "hip-hop is the CNN of the ghetto."<sup>44</sup> It is important to note that hip-hop continues to expand its cultural influence beyond urban spaces in America and this expansion has rendered obsolete the notion that hip-hop exists only in urban spaces. As it becomes a major cultural force in white suburban and rural youth culture, as it continues to internationalize itself, the idea of "street" retains its applicability because the creative animations, additions and subtractions, cultural innovations including important changes in language and dress still largely emanate from "the street" even while more suburban/rural youth are engaged in the culture. Even the idea of hip-hop sensibilities being shaped in non-urban spaces does not threaten the appropriateness of "street" as hip-hop culture was, from the beginning, and continues to be a product of the ideas and happenings in *public spaces*.

### **Connecting Gramsci and Hip-Hop**

Jeffrey Louis Decker coins the title "organic cultural intellectual" to describe "conscious rappers" within the Nation of Islam. Their organicism stems first from the fact that they "sustain their organic ties to the Black community from which they came and of which their music is a part."<sup>45</sup> Decker suggests this reality is in contrast to the vast

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<sup>44</sup> A number of different sources have claimed this quote and its variations "rap is the black CNN" or "rap is the CNN of the ghetto."

<sup>45</sup> Jeffrey Louis Decker, "the state of rap: time and place in hip-hop nationalism," *Social Text*, 34 (1993), 58.

majority of American politicians or entertainers who typically remove themselves from their geographic origins (both figuratively and literally). He goes on to say that these nation-conscious rappers are often involved in the kind of grassroots movements that are often constitutive of counter-hegemonic struggles. It is fitting that he claims such artists are heeding Cornel West's message.

While hip-hop nationalists are not politicians, they are involved in the production of cultural politics – its creation, its curriculum, its circulation, and its interpretation – which are tied to the everyday struggles of working-class Blacks and the urban poor. Perhaps more than most popular Black musicians, hip-hop nationalists follow Cornel West's assertion that “[s]ince black musicians play such an important role in Afro-American life, they have a special mission and responsibility: to present beautiful music [or serious noise] which both sustains and motivates black people and provides visions of what black people should aspire to.”<sup>46</sup>

Decker says that rappers most resemble Gramsci's notion of the organic intellectual when they, “appropriate popular knowledge from within the black community and exploit its most progressive elements in the process of envisioning a new society.”<sup>47</sup> Decker's emphasis on the cultural within Gramsci's notion of organic intellectuals follows West's treatment. Decker also makes note of Gramsci's notion of “common sense” or what Decker calls “popular knowledge.” Here Decker claims that the challenge of the organic cultural intellectual is to raise the interaction with popular knowledge to the critical level. Gramsci's discussion of “common sense” illustrates Decker's point.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. Decker's quoting of West is from “The Paradox of Afro-American Rebellion,” in *The Sixties Without Apology*, ed. Sohnya Sayers et. al., (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1984).

<sup>47</sup> Jeffrey Louis Decker, “the state of rap: time and place in hip-hop nationalism,” *Social Text*, 34 (1993), 59.

First of all, therefore, it must be a *criticism* of “common sense,” basing itself initially, however, on common sense in order to demonstrate that “everyone” is a philosopher and that it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone’s individual life, but of *renovating* and making “critical” an already existing activity (emphasis mine).<sup>48</sup>

The connection with Gramsci is convincing; however, taking a critical approach to and renovating popular knowledge is not the exclusive domain of Nationalist hip-hopppers. In fact, it would be difficult to argue that there are more organic cultural intellectuals within nation-conscious hip-hop than outside of it. Russell Simmons’s critically acclaimed HBO series “Def Poetry” features the performances of up-and-coming as well as established hip-hop “spoken word artists” or “performance poets” who treat Gramsci’s “common sense” or “popular knowledge” critically through a variety of political, social, and economic lenses in ways that contribute to a counter-hegemonic culture. Their *renovation* of popular knowledge is executed at both the stylistic and substantive levels. Put another way, the spoken word artists on “Def Poetry” are doing what Gramsci says organic intellectuals do with “common sense” both in form and in content.

One of the most commercially successful hip-hop artists of 2004 was Kanye West, whose multi-platinum *The College Dropout* concept album clearly earns him status as a postindustrial street intellectual. As Gramsci suggested, West’s is “mediocre philosophical work” at best. It deals with “common sense” critically; for instance, the track “All Falls Down” examines the phenomenon of a young African-American woman who attends college unreflectively. “She has no idea what she’s doing in college,” but she continues in a major to which she has no commitment since, “she can’t drop out, her

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<sup>48</sup> *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 330, 331.

parents'll look at her funny.” This woman is caught in the trap of the American culture of consumption, wrestling with identity issues and purpose, and “she be dealin’ with some issues that you can’t believe – single black female addicted to retail.” This song demonstrates a critical examination of what constitutes popular knowledge among Kanye West’s cultural peers, that is to say, the phenomenon of young Black adults resolving their identity struggles with a commitment to materialism – “We all self-conscious, I’m just the first to admit it.”<sup>49</sup>

Both Kanye West and the spoken word artists on Russell Simmons’s “Def Poetry” serve as examples of postindustrial street intellectuals connected to Gramscian notions of “common sense,” counter-hegemony, and the organic intellectual. The ties between hip-hop culture and Gramsci’s ideas are evident from a reading of Paul Piccone’s 1974 essay on Gramsci’s Marxism. He asserts that “[t]he organic intellectual must ‘feel’ with the people and reconstitute Marxist tactics in terms of the concrete context within which these people operate – institutions, dialects, traditions, and so on.”<sup>50</sup> Hip-hop’s postindustrial street intellectuals certainly emphasize the operation of counter-hegemonic cultural forces at the “ground level,” and “feel[ing] with the people” is what hip-hop, at its best, has been about since its inception.

### **Feeling Chicago: Local Postindustrial Street Intellectuals**

The lives, work, and aesthetic sensibilities of Melek Yonin, Dove Rock, and Idris Goodwin intersect with organic intellectualism in multiple ways. Dove Rock has an organic connection to a number of Chicago communities as she was born and raised in

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<sup>49</sup> Kanye West, “all falls down,” on *The College Dropout*, Roc-a-Fella Records, 2004.

<sup>50</sup> Paul Piccone, “Gramsci’s Hegelian Marxism,” *Political Theory*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Feb., 1974), 38.



the city.<sup>51</sup> Melek, though he grew up in suburban Chicago, counts as some of his fondest childhood memories the times he spent in the city. Subsequently, he has spent the bulk of his adult life residing in the city. Idris is a transplant from Detroit, but since coming to Chicago for school, he has spent his entire adult life living in the city as well. Though their performance schedules sometimes take them to venues and college campuses outside of the Chicago area (this is increasingly true as these artists garner more and more national exposure), the majority of their performances are still there.

The organic connection between communities in Chicago and the artists in this study is also a highly reflective and nuanced one. Sometimes this takes the form of celebrating Chicago's influence on the particular artist as in Melek Yonin's piece, "elegy for Lit X," in which "Lit X" refers to a now defunct bookstore in a downtown Chicago neighborhood that was seminally formative in Melek's elective education and aesthetic sense.

i never said shit/nervous to read  
my little raps before a kingdom of griots

but i loved the way you smelled

sandalwood sweat cowry shells locked in dreads and wool hats  
packed flesh Rastafarian hymns wafting frankincense blunt smoke  
bookstore hemp oil weed wisdom saturday night live spot

i met children prostrating with poems in the altar of your womb  
legitimate lyricists/street corner scholars/seditious dissonance  
on the drums of hip-hop disobedience/a basement  
before underground became a commercial calling card

Mama Africa in Wicker Park  
you kept it real  
it was/all good

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<sup>51</sup> As noted above, Dove moved to San Francisco at the very end of this study.

Lit X like Malcolm in prison  
i changed in your lap lullabies

KRS told me to read *How to Eat to Live* by Elijah Muhammad  
only your shelves carried the brown paperback/seven years later  
i do not consume the devil's diet but feed on fruits and vegetables

Mama i am starving since you were kidnapped  
i have not eaten properly since they shot you  
with property tax/i cannot sleep at night  
without hearing you scream

they are fucking with us, Mama  
they built master's metaphor/atop your grave site  
expect us to work there/cuz it's the only place we can  
get health insurance/they spit and trample on your open tomb

we will not bury you, Mama/you are not dead  
only on a vacation we needed/to organize ourselves better  
learn more/wrangle wild heads/into the dream of the struggle

we are building Mama  
all of us/waiting/on you  
to resurrect<sup>52</sup>

Lit X was a space where community happened and organic ties were established and it is one of several examples of spaces where such organicism was enacted in the hip-hop community that I came to know. Sections of neighborhoods, clubs, a local young authors' initiative,<sup>53</sup> were all important locations for the part of Chicago's hip-hop scene that I became familiar with. Yet, the connections transcend these spaces such that the local hip-hop community itself is what the artists in this study have organic ties to, ties that go beyond the spaces in which particular people moved. Melek, Idris Goodwin, and Dove Rock all operate with this organic connection and exercise a kind of postindustrial

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<sup>52</sup> Coval, *Slingshots: A Hip-Hop Poetica*.

<sup>53</sup> All of the subjects of this study were connected at varying levels to this artistic/educational initiative. In fact, all three were part of the organization's "Teaching Artist Roster" for 2005-2006. The organization provides educational workshops for young poets and writers as well as various performance opportunities. It also puts on a highly successful annual youth poetry slam that attracts individual poets and slam teams from a variety of local high schools.

street intellectualism that gets its inspiration from Gramscian notion of “feeling with the people.”

Dove Rock often foregrounds her status as high school dropout. Melek Yonin never finished the undergraduate degree he started. Of the three artists that are the focus of this study, Idris Goodwin has the most formal education. Yet, it is his street intellectualism that has come to constitute a salient portion of his identity and contributes significantly to the ways in which his internal reconstructions of self are related to a hip-hop aesthetic. His general criticism of the establishment discussed above is perhaps the greatest evidence of his organic intellectualism and indeed is the means by which Idris seeks to “modify popular thought.”<sup>54</sup> In this way, Idris’s kind of street intellectualism that is bound up in his connection to a hip-hop aesthetic can best be seen in his internal critiques. That is to say, hip-hop operates to a degree with its own kind of establishment that Idris often rallies against in his work. This came out in an interview in which Idris noted his resistance to the “headz”<sup>55</sup> in hip-hop journalism, specifically here, to one who has made claims that hip-hop has become self-diluting recently.

**Idris:** I make it a practice not to listen to the headz, just in general. I have never and I’m certainly not gonna start now. There’s a certain amount of gatekeeping that goes on and that’s just not gonna happen [him paying heed to these “gatekeepers”].

**KK:** ...So, in a sense he’s [referring to one of the journalist “headz”] got respect and longevity and he’s fucking brilliant so he can say, he can write

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<sup>54</sup> Antonio Gramsci, Quintin Hoare, and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 417.

<sup>55</sup> In hip-hop vernacular, this generally means “people” but it can specifically mean people with clout or something like that.

a piece or a column and he can basically decide when it is that hip-hop has diluted itself and he can tell a lot of people who are gonna listen.

**Idris:** Exactly, and that's why I think there needs to be ... I mean most of the people in that room [a recent panel discussion on hip-hop] were [just] talking, and I'm certainly not trying to diss nobody at all, but I'm like, dog, just this Saturday I did a show with all these groups that draw from this aesthetic that are completely different from one another. It's happening. It's never gonna stop, people are never gonna stop participating in hip-hop. It's never gonna stop, we're just gonna come up with new stuff for other people to bite and later put in commercials. We're the ones doing it. We are hip-hop. And hip-hop now is not supposed to look like it used to look. That would be stupid. That's just dumb. It's not gonna be what it was because it's different times now, too.

This criticism of gatekeeping within the culture is evident in the work of all the artists in this study, though it is most prevalent in Idris's.

Melek Yonin perhaps operates with the most pronounced street intellectualism of the artists in this study, and this starts with the idea that hip-hop necessarily led him to a kind of counter-school education that became the source of his discursive activism in his Eurocentric high school classes as discussed above. It was hip-hop that "opened up a canon" for him that he was not being introduced to in his formal schooling. It was hip-hop that not only promoted his accessing the kind of literature ignored by his high school curriculum, indeed a self-directed education, but also an education of the self.

**Melek:** Yeah, I mean hip-hop made me want to read. I mean it demanded that I read. In order to know what was being said, in order to get the full story, I had to read. And you know, knowledge reigns supreme over nearly everyone, KRS's acronym, you know. "The teacher" he was talking about self-education, you know, knowledge of the self. Yeah, it [hip-hop] demanded those things.

Of course, this was the same demand that led Melek to Lit X, which led to a canon of literature that included James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez. It also resulted in a sense of self prodigiously influenced by a hip-hop aesthetic, not the least of which was KRS ONE's encouragement. Armed with this hip-hop induced counter-school literary knowledge and a deeply reflective sense of self, Melek has become a kind of organic rector of his particular circle of budding MCs, DJs, and spoken word artists. Almost all of the artists I met during the course of this study were or had been at one time under either the formal or informal tutelage of Melek.

Melek also understands the Gramscian idea of "feeling with the people." Melek and Idris have performed their two-man show at a number of high schools and colleges, and I was along to observe during one of the early performances (in fact, the show was still in the developing stages) at a local high school. The performance was for an alternative school program within the school for students who had been "unsuccessful" in the traditional school program. It was clear to me during the observation that the students (exclusively nonwhite) were engaged at a level that their teachers in the program had rarely, if ever, reached with them. This resulted in a discussion between Melek, Idris, and me following the school visit about engagement and education.

**Melek:** We didn't go in there to teach, but to *engage* ... That's why hip-hop is so smart. What does it say, "[do] you feel me?" "Are you engaged?" Right? Basically that's the question ... "Are you with me?"

## Chapter Four

### You Better Lose Yourself!: Reformulated Praxis Theory, Spirituality, and Hip-Hop Aesthetics

Indeed, Lord, to your eyes the very depths of a man's conscience are exposed, and there is nothing in me that I could keep secret from you, even if I did not want to confess it. I should not be hiding myself from you, but you from myself. But now when my groaning bears evidence that I am displeased with myself, you shine out on me and are pleasing and loved and longed for, so that I am ashamed of myself and renounce myself and choose you and, except in you, can please neither you or myself.

Saint Augustine

one time i heard Afrika Bambatta say  
*when you hear the breakbeat / you let your g-dSelf get loose ...*

i couldn't afford a BMW or new clothes at the mall / and didn't want it / comin up  
in the 80's all i wanted to do was rock African medallions, some juju beads and hang out  
with X-Clan / but i felt like nobody would understand where i was coming from / so i just buried  
myself in the music / kept on hearing the refrain / *it ain't where ya from*  
*its where ya at / re-present re-re-present / it ain't where ya from its where ya at*

hip-hop asks one eternal question / what do you represent

it was when i was in a Hasidic synagogue in montreal  
during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the night of Kol Nidre  
the most important time on the Jewish calendar  
where we have one final evening to be inscribed in the book of life  
and pray with all of our might that i saw my people

swaying back and forth                      bowingsupplicating                      head nodding  
bodies                      twisting frenetic, *tallit* whirling like tendrils, bodies  
bearded and sweating                      popping                      submissive                      to the rhythm  
of prayer  
for the first time i davened  
with the energy and ecstasy of a b-boy in battle

Melek Yonin

... from the universal to the specific  
my flow manifests spirit ...

Idris Goodwin and Melek Yonin

Cultural production in hip-hop has become such a multifarious notion from its original live performance, counter-culture orientation in the South Bronx to its early

commercialization with Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight"; to its hyper-commodification that produced the ubiquitous use of hip-hop in selling everything from sneakers to hamburgers and also created "hip-hop moguls" like Russell Simmons, Diddy, and (the most recent artist/producer/entrepreneur to reach such status) Jay-Z; to the birth of a generation of so-called underground hip-hop artists who are more likely to seek to recapture the early counter-hegemonic impulses than their more commercially successful peers. The fact that hip-hop has gone from a local phenomenon to an international one adds to the layers of complexity in the culture. Yet, there are common aesthetic threads that can be traced through the vast amount of cultural production that hip-hop has unleashed around the globe. Obviously no single aesthetic sensibility is likely to be found in every iteration of hip-hop culture. However, there are certain ideas that can help organize inquiry into the self-aesthetic relation in hip-hop because they seem to be recurring themes with artists and in the culture generally. I have located above organic intellectualism and the prophetic voice as two such themes tied directly to the connection between reconstructions of the self and hip-hop aesthetics. Here, I examine another related notion that is gaining some amount of attention in hip-hop studies, yet remains underarticulated and untheorized and has not yet been tied to the self-aesthetic relation as it can be observed "on the ground" with the hip-hop artists themselves.

There is an emergent body of work on the connection between hip-hop and religion and spirituality. Mostly this work focuses on drawing lines of commonality between hip-hop and religious institutions and practices, even when it frames the connection as "hip-hop and spirituality."<sup>1</sup> The tracing of hip-hop aesthetics to Black

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<sup>1</sup> See especially Anthony B. Pinn, *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music* (New York: New York University Press, 2003). This collection of essays is divided into thirds and two-



homiletics is certainly not new, nor is the explicit relationship between a number of hip-hop artists and the Five Percent Nation of Islam.<sup>2</sup> What does seem to be missing from these articulations is a description of general spiritual *experiences* and spiritual *sensibilities*, not necessarily tied in some direct way to institutional religious practice or dogma, that stem from a participation in hip-hop aesthetics and the theorizing that can be done about spirituality and identity claims broadly, based on an analysis of such experiences.<sup>3</sup>

Dove Rock, Idris Goodwin, and Melek Yonin have all articulated, though in differing ways, notions about spirituality and hip-hop. Idris and Melek in particular have described experiences they have had participating in hip-hop aesthetics that they explicitly name as “spiritual.” These artists’ identities are clearly shaped by these experiences and ideas that are sometimes tacitly and other times overtly tied to a sense of spirituality or spiritual experiences. Below I will describe in detail these sensibilities and experiences, how they are tied to “living out” a hip-hop aesthetic, and how each artist’s ideas and work is affected by them. In order to use inquiry into these experiences to better articulate and theorize about spirituality and hip-hop, a significant amount of

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thirds of the book is dedicated to the “religious” connection. One section of the book is titled “Rap and Issues of ‘Spirit’ and ‘Spirituality’” but only one of the essays in this section directly addresses this connection. Mark Lewis Taylor’s “Bringing Noise, Conjuring Spirit: Rap as Spiritual Practice” comes closest to treating spirituality independently of religious traditions or practices but still falls short of articulating a connection between hip-hop and spirituality where spirituality is not at all conflated with religion or religious practice.

<sup>2</sup> See especially Jeffrey Louis Decker, “the state of rap: time and place in hip-hop nationalism,” *Social Text*, 34 (1993).

<sup>3</sup> While I will discuss below the idea that Melek claims hip-hop was his route “back to Judaism,” I do not consider this claim to be a religious one per se. Melek’s journey is one that is tied to notions of the self and identity (combined with general spiritual impulses) that happens to result in a renewed sense of his religious heritage. Yet, the *spirituality of the journey* is not, for Melek, necessarily tied to a religious institution or institutional practices as we shall see. Certainly what I am calling spiritual sensibilities and experiences can be manifest in moments that are in the context of particular religions, as in the prayer of Saint Augustine and in Melek Yonin’s poem, “breakbeats let my g-dSelf loose,” but the spirituality of those experiences seems to transcend the particular religious contexts in which they are found.

context must be explored including both definitional and theoretical groundwork. I will use Phil Carspecken's essay "Power, Truth, and Method" as the central theoretical piece for exploring praxis, spirituality, and the self-aesthetic relation in hip-hop.<sup>4</sup>

### **Spirituality and Black Musical Expression**

First, it is important to get as clear as we can about what is meant by "spirit" and "spirituality." These concepts are at least as elusive as the idea of the prophetic (discussed in chapter one), and therefore it is not the goal of this short section to exhaust the definitional possibilities of these ideas. I will take up the notion of spirituality in a more complete way below after ideas such as reformulated praxis theory and the desire for recognition are elucidated. Here, my aim is to provide a brief, working idea of spirit, and this is why I am situating it solely within context of Black musical expression. It is also worthy of note that attempts to define "spirit" and "spirituality" outright are likely to run the risk of conflating the ideas with institutional religion, something that should be avoided here primarily because the subjects of this study do not necessarily experience spirituality in ways or have the kind of spiritual sensibilities that are exclusively or directly tied to particular institutional religions per se. Yet, it is also important to avoid a kind of sweeping approach to defining the terms here that could render them meaningless. Given that this study is associated with what most would consider African-American forms of expression, it seems that a potentially fruitful location for an initial attempt at making sense of the idea of "spirit" and "spirituality" is in the context of Black musical expression.

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<sup>4</sup> Phil Francis Carspecken, *Four Scenes for Posing the Question of Meaning and Other Essays in Critical Philosophy and Critical Methodology* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999).30-117.

A look at Black forms of musical expression in America reveals their transcendence of music and entertainment, indeed, ultimately their spiritual character. The African-American expressive response to nihilistic threat has produced various hybrid musical forms through the insertion of African performance practices into European structures that are inherently spiritual because they are the primary means of cultural education, they provide the wherewithal to hold nihilism at bay, and they are often influenced by Black homiletics and the culture of the Black church (even when the music is not explicitly religious). Cornel West reminds us that the threat of nihilism has been part and parcel of the Black experience in America from its inception following the pernicious theft of Africans from the motherland.

Nihilism is not new in black America. The first African encounter with the New World was an encounter with a distinctive form of The Absurd. The initial black struggle against degradation and devaluation in the enslaved circumstances of the New World was, in part, a struggle against nihilism ... The genius of our black foremothers and forefathers was to create powerful buffers to ward off the nihilistic threat, to equip black folk with the cultural armor to beat back the demons of hopelessness, meaninglessness, and lovelessness.<sup>5</sup>

West later describes in more detail the various manifestations of this “cultural armor.” What is most salient here is that from the beginnings of the African experience in the New World, musical expressions served as this kind of armor that fended off the threat of hopelessness. It seems, then, that artful forms of expression whose intention is to thwart nihilism are inherently spiritual. That is to say, they are necessarily concerned with the *spirit* or perhaps the *soul* as an individual ontological structure.

The cultural armor of which West speaks has taken many expressive forms, and hip-hop lies squarely within this trajectory. This is not to say that hip-hop aesthetics necessarily include an explicit attempt to keep nihilism at bay (though plenty of hip-hop

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<sup>5</sup> Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

does resemble this kind of “cultural armor”) but rather that it *attends to the spirit*. It does so by demanding to be heard when its voice is suppressed and marginalized. It asks not, “do you understand?” or “are you listening?” but rather, “do you *feel* me?” and it demands both intellectual engagement and bodily participation from its audience. It challenges, paradigmatically, oppressive and powerful social institutions and gives voice to the oppressed. Hip-hop, in its best manifestations, is a kind of egalitarian expressive activity that confronts and challenges dominant cultural and societal notions through, for instance, the cipher.

Again, to be sure, this does not exhaust the notion of spirituality. Hopefully, though, this context makes it clear enough for now what is meant by the kind of attending to the spirit that I am claiming hip-hop does. The kind of spiritual experiences and sensibilities of the subjects of this study are directly tied to this expressive activity that attends to the spirit and this idea makes the most sense when we consider it in the context of reformulated praxis theory.

### **Identity, Praxis, and Power**

Carspecken argues that Paul Willis’s ethnography of working class boys in England, *Learning to Labor*, is the paradigmatic study that constitutes a breaking of new ground that paved the way for those that followed to draft the phrase “critical ethnography.”<sup>6</sup> Its importance for hip-hop and the self-aesthetic relation lies primarily in its tacit reshaping of praxis theory and therefore it will be important to explore praxis theory as it was conceived by various groups around the time of Willis’s study and how

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<sup>6</sup> Carspecken, *Four Scenes for Posing the Question of Meaning and Other Essays in Critical Philosophy and Critical Methodology*. 37.

we can interpret the impact of *Learning to Labor* with respect to praxis. The context for this reformulation begins with the concept of power and the agency-versus-structure debates of the 1970s among three major Marxist camps: Marxist-culturalists (mostly connected to E.P. Thompson), Marxist-structuralists (largely associated with Althusser), and the traditionalists. It is not necessary for the purposes of this study to rehearse the details of the conflict between these camps, and it has been done in a sophisticated manner elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> Here, I am concerned with the way in which power was treated in these debates and the resultant implications for praxis theory, so I will provide a brief sketch of the arguments made by each camp with this focus.

The debate between these three Marxist camps was ontological in that it was concerned not with epistemological issues related to power, structure, and agency, but rather, it sought to determine how to conceive of general structures of social reality and to become clear about ideas such as “social structure,” “social action,” “power,” “class,” and ultimately, “social existence.” So, the question of power with regard to structure and agency was an ontological argument for the three groups of Marxists mentioned above.

The traditionalists relied on the “base-superstructure” model that worked as a form of functionalism that explicitly located power solely within social structures. For the traditionalists, aspects of society, including culture and politics, were explained according to their function with respect to the economic “base.” Although power was not addressed in a sophisticated way, it was definitely located within the social system. Yet, the traditionalist treatment of power contradicted itself. When calling for social change,

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<sup>7</sup> R. Johnson, “Three problematics: Elements of a theory of working class culture,” in John Clarke et al., *Working-Class Culture : Studies in History and Theory*, Hutchinson University Library (London: Hutchinson, in association with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1979).

it appealed to agency at the same time that agency was ruled out as explanatory in its functionalist societal critiques. Traditionalists claimed that social change had to be ushered in by human agents, therefore locating power within agency, but they then asserted that change could only happen on a revolutionary scale at the right stage of capitalism, an idea which clearly placed power back into the social system.<sup>8</sup>

The structuralist camp, with Althusser at the center, was more coherent and refined in its/his arguments than the traditionalists. Althusser consistently ruled out agency and subjectivity as explanatory categories with regard to social change, and in this way, he was in step with the structuralist movement, generally speaking.<sup>9</sup> He quite clearly argued that power was solely a structural component. Carspecken notes that Althusser's work does not garner the respect it once did largely because of successful arguments within Marxist discourse that wanted to employ human agency as an explanatory factor in social theory, though his work remains significant in its attack on the traditionalists and the "base-superstructure" idea.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, the Marxist-culturalist group, associated with E.P. Thompson, argued against both the traditionalists (with their "base-superstructure" model) and the Marxist-structuralists for their failure to acknowledge human agency as an explanatory factor in social change and for the way in which they had failed to recognize the importance of culture. For Thompson, power is mostly a feature of human agency and is located only within the social system to the extent that the system obtrudes upon agency through political and economic constraints. So, Carspecken claims that for Marxist-culturalists,

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<sup>8</sup> Carspecken, *Four Scenes for Posing the Question of Meaning and Other Essays in Critical Philosophy and Critical Methodology*.

<sup>9</sup> See Alex Callinicos, *Althusser's Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 1976) for an opposing view.

<sup>10</sup> Carspecken, *Four Scenes for Posing the Question of Meaning and Other Essays in Critical Philosophy and Critical Methodology*.

power is located in every human act; yet, each act takes place within certain constraining conditions.<sup>11</sup> This idea provides the context for a discussion of praxis theory and its reformulation.

In order to understand how Willis picked up praxis theory and reformulated it in ways that have significance for hip-hop and the self-aesthetic relation, it is important to summarize Marx's use of praxis. The Marxist-culturalists insisted that Marx consistently made use of praxis theory throughout his corpus although Althusser and the structuralists claimed that while the early Marx used a theory of human agency, the later Marx moved away from subjectivity and instead adumbrated structuralism in *Das Capital*.<sup>12</sup>

In the earlier writings of Marx such as *Theses on Feuerbach*, which the culturalists referred to for their arguments about human agency, praxis was discussed within the Hegelian context that held sway at that particular historical moment. Thus, Marx made use of Hegelian categories such as "self-production," "alienation," and "objectification" in his discussions of praxis. Hegel's idea was that *Geist* produces itself through expression of its nature in objective forms even while no objective form can actually fully express it and so each expression contains a contradiction that leads to new expression; this process is known as a dialectic. Marx, on the other hand, located these same ideas within the human subject as opposed to *Geist*, that is to say he thought human beings, not *Geist*, expressed themselves in objective forms in order to produce themselves. Being human is being an expressive entity whose existence is more like a process of self-formation through objectivation than like the existence of physical things. This was an indispensable move for praxis theory but, in his attempt to completely shed

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 36 and 37.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 37.

Hegel's idealism, Marx limited the concept to human action oriented toward the physical world. According to Carspecken, this was a damaging move that "truncated the core insight."<sup>13</sup> Willis would later repair the damage, at least implicitly, with his tacit reformulations.

Marx's general idea was that human beings are motivated to express themselves or to actualize themselves through work oriented toward the physical world. This is why the artisan is the paradigmatic case for him. In this way, humans create themselves or create a self through the products they produce skillfully and artistically. This kind of activity engenders pride and satisfaction. However, this actualizing depends upon certain conditions. The tools and other materials, the modes of production, must be under the control of the human agent creating the product otherwise she will experience "alienation" because she is essentially cut off from the products she creates. The working class of a capitalist society becomes "alienated" in this way since it is not their own ideas they are using to create products, but rather those of designers or other employers that use them only for their labor. Additionally, workers do not own the products they produce, nor do they own the tools with which the products are made, and this contributes to their "alienation."

Carspecken refers to the kind of motivation human beings have to actualize in this way as an attempt to fulfill "expressive needs," by which he means "the need to become a self, maintain a self, and grow as a self through expressive activity."<sup>14</sup> That praxis theory is ultimately about the desire to meet these expressive needs leads Carspecken to group Hegel, Marx, and Herder (whose ideas were labeled "expressivism" by Charles Taylor

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.



because Herder thought that the existence of human beings was basically an expressive movement from potential to manifestation)<sup>15</sup> together as having sophisticated, though implicit, theories of human motivation.

The key conclusion for hip-hop aesthetics is that Hegel, Marx, and Herder all implicitly captured the notion that human beings are fundamentally concerned with *identity*. Praxis is a theory of human existence that connects humanness with desire and motivation. Carspecken reminds us, though, that praxis cannot be solely about work oriented toward the physical world. Herder and Hegel were more aligned with the notion that praxis needs can be met through expressive activity that does not produce a material result. Hegel noted the desire for recognition from which human expression flows. Carspecken comments that this means praxis is “more about human-to-human relations than it is about human-to-physical world relations.”<sup>16</sup>

Human beings, motivated by the desire for recognition seek to meet their “expressive needs” of forming and maintaining a self through production. This is Marx’s praxis theory but he lost key insights from Herder and Hegel along the way when he focused exclusively on action oriented toward the physical world. The desire for recognition that Hegel emphasized is fed by human-to-human relations. This is the kind of reformulation of praxis theory that Willis’s *Learning to Labor* does, albeit implicitly. This also describes the way “expressive needs” are met through the engagement of hip-hop aesthetics.

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<sup>15</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society, Modern European Philosophy* (Cambridge [Eng.] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

<sup>16</sup> Carspecken, *Four Scenes for Posing the Question of Meaning and Other Essays in Critical Philosophy and Critical Methodology*, 40.

Willis's "lads" willingly participated in permanently locking themselves into their fathers' working class, shopfloor culture and rebelled against their teachers' urgings about the importance of school. They did so because they were first and foremost cultural producers; their socially constructed identities were of higher importance than goal-oriented action and plans for the future. The primacy of identity and the reality that human beings are motivated by the desire for recognition are part and parcel of Willis's reformulated praxis theory. Original Marxist ideas about "alienation" remain in Willis's tacit re-workings but he also recaptures insights from Hegel and Herder by replacing Marx's paradigmatic artisan and her actions solely oriented toward the physical world with a more thoroughgoing understanding of human self-expression that includes the notion that it is not the material products that are self-expression in and of themselves but rather, they become self-expressive in the sense that other people might recognize the person through her creation. Since the "lads" were "alienated" by the culture of the school that denied their "expressive needs," they responded by creating cultural forms in opposition to such "alienation," and this was of greater importance for them than anything, including making future plans based on goal-oriented action that might increase their vocational choices or even provide them with opportunities to change their socioeconomic status. With this reformulation of praxis theory, "expressive needs," for Willis are resituated within human-to-human actions, not action oriented toward the physical world.

## Power, Foucault, and Derrida

Carspecken goes on to discuss the notion of power as it is treated by Foucault and Derrida.<sup>17</sup> Though this discussion takes a bit of a turn from the focus on Willis's tacit reformulation of praxis theory, it is an important step toward the relationship between power, the desire for recognition, and spirituality that will eventually be discussed in light of hip-hop aesthetics and the experiences of the artists in this study.

Carspecken takes Foucault's ideas to be a reduction of truth to power, executed in a contradictory way. For this analysis, he examines the theme of the "death of the subject" in its Foucauldian treatment. Modernist thought had reached an end owing to its insistence on employing human subjectivity as an explanatory category from which so much theorizing was built. Foucault thought that the postmodern era uncovered this dead end by showing how the theorizing eventually resulted in "doubles" (e.g., the empirical/transcendental "double" in Hegel and Marx) owing to the fact that the modern period was animated by the contradictory notion that subjectivity is a precondition for all knowledge, yet, it is also possible to obtain knowledge about subjectivity. Put another way, the human subject must exist *prior to* knowledge even as it is one of a litany of *objects of knowledge*. Thus, for Foucault, the "double" is the result of modern thinkers attempting to navigate this tension by suppressing one notion of subjectivity at the

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<sup>17</sup> A recent quotation from a feminist philosopher is instructive here in terms of the contemporary debate regarding the use of categories such as "postmodernism" and "poststructuralism" and which thinkers belong in which category. "For the past few decades postmodernism has been at the center of debates about philosophy, history, culture, and politics, including feminist theory and politics. Its theoretical rationale can be found in poststructuralist modes of social and cultural analysis and its concerns are echoed in postmodern cultural practices. The range of theories broadly described as "postmodern" includes writers as diverse as Lyotard (1924–), Baudrillard (1929–), Derrida (1930–), Lacan (1901–81), and Foucault (1926–84). Among women theorists Julia Kristeva (1941–) and Luce Irigaray (1932–) have been particularly important," C. Weedon, "Postmodernism" in Alison M. Jaggar and Iris Marion Young, *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, *Blackwell Companions to Philosophy* ; 13 (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998).

expense of the other just as Hegel emphasized the transcendental and suppressed the empirical while Marx did the opposite.<sup>18</sup> The ultimate result was the development and eventual failure of theories built on subjectivity as an explanatory notion. Foucault, then, replaced the primacy of human subjectivity from the modern era with his notion of power. He did this through his “archeology” and, later, “genealogy” of knowledge that uncovered unconscious cultural conditions for notions of truth.<sup>19</sup> Power produces “discourse-practices” that set the conditions for what is accepted as truth, that is to say, they are prior to truths. “Discourse-practices” construct notions of truth and then they mask this act of construction. However, since human subjectivity is no longer an acceptable explanatory category, “discourse-practices” do not rise and fall according to human assessments about the claims about reality and truth that they make—in other words through ideology critique—since that would presuppose subjectivity. So Foucault had the idea of “anonymous power” that served as the primary explanatory term in his elucidation of “discourse-practices.”<sup>20</sup>

Carspecken’s primary critique of Foucault’s postmodernism concerns the reduction of truth to power. Foucault’s ideas themselves seem to fall into some of the same traps he is convinced have brought modernity to its end. While Foucault claims that the use of human subjectivity as the primordial explanatory category leads to “doubles,” Carspecken argues that power is just as susceptible to this threat. As power

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<sup>18</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, [1st American ed. (New York,: Pantheon Books, 1971).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish : The Birth of the Prison*, 1st American ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 1st American ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

<sup>20</sup> Carspecken, *Four Scenes for Posing the Question of Meaning and Other Essays in Critical Philosophy and Critical Methodology*.

becomes the primary explanatory notion for Foucault, it operates empirically as the object of his study, but it also tacitly functions transcendently.<sup>21</sup>

Another criticism Carspecken levels at Foucault's reduction of truth to power is that it undermines itself with its claim that "discourse-practices" that are not simply congruent with real phenomena set conditions for what is to be taken as truth at a particular historical moment. Therefore, Foucault's ideas themselves are a product of "discourse-practices" whose conditions for truth are internally constructed through anonymous power. It seems there is no compelling reason, then, to accept his idea.<sup>22</sup>

There is a relationship between truth and power, Carspecken claims, but their distinction must be made clear in the wake of Foucault. The distinction operates in all efforts to be understood (this idea holds significance for hip-hop aesthetics), and Foucault was certainly writing to be understood by an audience, and his writing was aimed, on some level, at convincing the audience of the legitimacy of his ideas.<sup>23</sup> In other words, following Habermas, Foucault himself appeals for power-free understanding of his own texts and cannot help but do so. This makes sense only if we separate power and truth, power and knowledge.

Before the relationship between power and truth can be further elucidated, it is important to discuss Derrida's idea of "the metaphysics of presence." Derrida's first "deconstruction" was an eminent critique of Husserl's phenomenology.<sup>24</sup> In this text,

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 49. Carspecken has subsequently developed his critique of Foucault and takes it in a different direction in Phil Francis Carspecken, "Ocularcentrism, Phonocentrism and the Counter-Enlightenment Problematic: Clarifying Contested Terrain in Our Schools of Education," *Teachers College Record* 105, no. 6 (2003), 995-1001.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* (Evanston,: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

Derrida showed how Husserl's project of building knowledge upon certain foundations relies on the idea of presence. This was Husserl's phenomenology, that the experience of a phenomenon, not the existence of objects, was the source of certain knowledge.

Husserl's 'principle of all principles' was that the one thing that cannot be doubted is the experience of phenomena. Derrida showed that in order for this experience of a phenomenon to be considered certain knowledge and the ground for all certain knowledge, one must claim that there is a moment in which the object is "purely present" before the subject experiencing it. This "pure presence" is what Derrida deconstructed, using Husserl's own arguments.

The point is that the moment at which I am aware of my experience of a phenomenon is necessarily a separate and distinct moment from my experience of having this phenomenon before me. The former is always a reference to the latter and the latter is therefore always already gone by the time I am aware—it is a "trace." Derrida claimed that the moment I am aware of my knowledge of an object before me, I have referenced a moment that is "always already" gone by, and what is left is actually a "trace" or a kind of memory impression that references the previous moment of presence. But this is the case if we follow Husserl's logic, and this deconstructs his logic—his division of time into moments and his belief in presence. Even the moment in which I am aware of a previous moment already gone turns out to be a "trace." Experience of a phenomenon and knowledge of that experience cannot be simultaneous.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Carspecken, *Four Scenes for Posing the Question of Meaning and Other Essays in Critical Philosophy and Critical Methodology*, 50, 51. Of course, this is a very short and simplified summary of dense ideas. For the purposes of this text, only a cursory understanding is necessary as only the basic ideas will be used as contextual pieces for a discussion of spirituality and hip-hop aesthetics.

Carspecken claims that Derrida's ideas have important implications for the relationship between desire, power, and truth. If we use "desire" broadly, that is to say, if it is conceived of as having to do with a variety of senses of motivation, it is a basic structure within human experience and meaning. This means that experience is always animated by a desire for what is not yet, and this can include fear or anticipation/motivation of any kind to move to the next moment. For Derrida, this idea is due to the impossibility of presence or is at least intimately connected with it, and the fact that the "trace" defers to a moment of presence that cannot be reached. This is why one can find Derrida writing in various texts about the "longing for presence" that is, of course, never reached because of the impossibility of presence. Yet, Carspecken claims that there are moments in Derrida's writing when he articulates a view of existence in which humans desire to make certain basic uncertainties, and this process leads to expressions of power.

Humans continually assert 'truths' that they cannot prove or know, due to the unreachability of presence. Humans assert because they are motivated to do so. Humans fundamentally want certainty, long for it, and express power trying to feel it. Yet it is unattainable.<sup>26</sup>

While these ideas about desire, truth, and power are part of another deconstructive move for Derrida, for Carspecken they are insights that can contribute to positive formulations, as opposed to deconstruction. Derridian insights about desire, truth, and power are reminiscent of Nietzsche, Sartre, and Kierkegaard, that is to say, of existentialist thought.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 56. See also Carspecken's use of Nietzsche and his "figurative drive" in "Ocularcentrism, Phonocentrism and the Counter-Enlightenment Problematic: Clarifying Contested Terrain in Our Schools of Education," 984.

## **Carspecken's Reconfigurations**

For Carspecken, the Derridian insights about power, truth, experience, and desire can be resituated in a different context than deconstruction. Because experience cannot be knowledge without some kind of assertion of power (due to the impossibility or the “metaphysics of presence”) truth assertions are truth claims. This is important for Carspecken's treatment of the insights from Derrida. He eventually relocates these ideas in the context of reformulated praxis theory.

Carspecken uses Habermas to rethink the insights of Derrida regarding presence and the critique of Husserl. In a detailed section of “Power, Truth, and Method,” he “reconfigures” the scene of presence with its solitary subject. Here I will give only a very brief summary of that reconfiguration, leaving out Carspecken's illustrations of the ideas, in an effort to get directly to the points of connection with hip-hop aesthetics. Many schools of philosophy have been constructed on the foundation of the “originary scene” of the lone, passive observer contemplating an object. Yet, there is more happening than the perception of a solitary observer, even though Western thought has been mostly built on the foregrounding of perception in this scene. In addition to perception, there is the constant movement of thought and desire. Carspecken reconfigures the scene to include another human subject to illustrate the way in which communicative expectations are equally primordial to the scene as perception.

There are four layers of expectations that lead to intersubjectivity: expectations of consequences alone, expectations of how others will act with regard to the object of experience, tacit expectations of intersubjectivity and communicative action, and finally, explicit intersubjectivity and communicative action. Once intersubjectivity is reached,



experience becomes knowledge-imparting. So, for Carspecken, communicative anticipations or expectations are more primary than “presence.” He summarizes,

If I am to be able to transform an *experience of* into a *knowledge of*, I must simultaneously take the position of others in relation to my object of experience, and my “knowledge” is bound by expectations of how communicative actions that refer to the object would be understood by others.<sup>27</sup>

Ultimately, this reconfiguration means that the primordial scene of the solitary observer shifts to a scene that includes two consciousnesses. This is, then, a shift from a monological theory of truth to a dialogical one. Habermas enters the picture here with his theory of communicative action. He agrees that the primary scene should be two subjects communicating rather than the single observer. Habermas’s theory asserts that when human beings act in meaningful ways, they are making “validity claims” or what we might call truth claims<sup>28</sup> in three distinct categories. Objective claims are those made about the objective world to which humans have access. Subjective claims are related to the principle of privileged access. Unlike the objective world, there is not multiple access to a person’s subjectivity. Normative-evaluative claims (Carspecken has combined two categories here that Habermas keeps separate) are related to ideas of good and bad, right and wrong. Neither multiple or privileged access applies here. Only other value claims could be appealed to in trying to ground a normative-evaluative claim.

Many meaningful human acts imply all three types of claims with some more foregrounded and others more backgrounded. In addition, and perhaps of most significance for this study, all meaningful acts reference an “identity claim.” The validity horizon of an identity claim can be configured in any number of ways in terms of the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>28</sup> See “Power, Truth, and Method” p. 72 for an explanation of why Habermas uses “validity” instead of “truth.”

three categories and the backgrounding-foregrounding continuum The identity claim itself can be more or less foregrounded.

### **Habermas/Carspecken and the Internal/External Relationships Between Truth, Power, and Action**

As mentioned above, both Habermas and Carspecken claim that there is a relationship between power and truth and thus they are critical of Foucault's reduction of truth to power. The relationship between the two for Habermas and Carspecken is best understood as external and internal. Habermas's idea about the external relationship between truth and power is best understood in relation to his "ideal speech situation." This is the situation that is presupposed by his theory of communicative action, and it entails social settings in which participants have equal social standing and have as their only motivation reaching understanding. More specifically, power is equalized or neutralized.<sup>29</sup> This "ideal speech situation" is treated as a "limit case" or the situation that is presupposed or referenced although it is most likely never empirically reached. The point is that power acts externally as a distorting force in communicative action. This is one way to describe the relationship between truth and power and to avoid Foucault's reduction of the two.

The power/truth relationship also can be examined internally in communicative action. Remember, it is not the negation of power that is presupposed by the "ideal speech situation" but rather, the neutralization of power. Habermas and Carspecken treat power as a positive concept. Habermas makes this move with an emphasis on action

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<sup>29</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

oriented toward consequences while Carspecken wants to apply this kind of internal connection between truth and power more to action oriented toward understanding, as we shall see.

Habermas overtly locates power internally with regard to actions oriented toward consequences. These kinds of actions are characterized by goals and the acts are deemed “powerful” when the goals are met or the act is “successful.” What about acts that are not successful or do not reach their goals? In this case, Carspecken uses ideas about agency from Anthony Giddens to assert that power still has an internal connection. Giddens claims that action and power are logically connected since action always has some kind of impact on the world. Carspecken concludes, “Power is a capacity of the actor presupposed by her action. The concept of ‘actor,’ or ‘agent,’ presupposes this capacity. All acts presuppose power, therefore, and empirically it is only a question of *how much power* is expressed (emphasis in original).”<sup>30</sup> The idea that agency presupposes power is consistent with Habermas’s theory of communicative action.

Habermas’s treatment of the internal relationship between power and action focuses mostly on the context of action oriented toward consequences. However, Carspecken puts emphasis on power and action within action oriented toward understanding. In the same way that action oriented toward consequences contains goals that will be “powerful” and “successful” if met, action oriented toward understanding also has goals, and we think about them as being successful to the degree that we feel understood or, as Carspecken says, the goals of action oriented toward understanding

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<sup>30</sup> Carspecken, *Four Scenes for Posing the Question of Meaning and Other Essays in Critical Philosophy and Critical Methodology*.

refer to “nonobjective states.”<sup>31</sup> So, it makes sense to say that these “communicative goals” suggest an internal relationship between power and action because we feel “empowered” when the goals are reached or when we feel understood or recognized through our communicative acts.

### **Communicative Goals and the Desire for Recognition**

In action oriented toward consequences, the level of success of the goal is observable in the objective world, while goals related to action oriented toward understanding are observable only in nonobjective, subjective states. Carspecken adds that communicative goals often are not clarified in terms of the exact understanding that is desired until after the communicative act is completed.<sup>32</sup> This has significance both for identity claims and, notably, for communicative goals that are bound up in expressive needs and pursued through performance as is common for the artists in this study. As Carspecken says, it is not uncommon to hear someone say, “I didn’t know what I really needed to say until after I said it!”<sup>33</sup> This is so because agents often have implicit and holistic understandings of that which they wish to communicate that come prior to the explicit content that comes in the form of words, gestures, or performances. There is a kind of uncertainty that the actor feels in this prior moment of holistic understanding about the significance or validity of the content. This uncertainty becomes the impetus for expressing what the actor has understood implicitly and holistically. It is important to note that agents can feel that the expression falls short of the prior holistic understanding.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 83.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

This often leads to a person saying something like, “No, I guess that’s not really what I meant,” or “That’s not quite it.” On the other hand, the expressions can sometimes exceed what was grasped holistically and prior to the articulation and in these cases the actor often mentions surprising herself. Again, this is of special significance when it comes to artistic expression and in particular, the artists in this study have talked about performances in ways that match the ideas above.

This is also a moment at which recognition enters the scene. The success of a communicative act is often the result of the agent recognizing her own act. Indeed, she will also notice a sense of shortcoming if the act is unsuccessful. After the act is completed, the actor will find a match between holistic, implicit understandings and the expression or not. Carspecken points out that this idea is connected to the concept of expectation. “Among the many expectations constituting any meaningful act are always a cluster that anticipate what the act will bring out *for the actor* (emphasis in original).<sup>34</sup>

Recognition is also a desire to be recognized as an autonomous agent by others. This desire manifests itself in the identity claims that are a part of every meaningful human act at various levels of foregrounding or backgrounding. It is clear that this desire for recognition from others indicates a need for human beings to construct a social self. This desire leads to identity claims, and these claims are often attached to the fulfillment of “expressive needs.” Yet there is the contradiction that the social self never captures what is desired.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 92.

## **Refocusing Spirituality**

With these ideas about reformulated praxis theory, power, action, identity, and desire, the groundwork has been laid to discuss spirituality in a broader way than was done earlier. For this purpose I will discuss and apply ideas from a recent talk by Carspecken<sup>35</sup> and in so doing I will highlight the Kierkegaardian ideas and supplement them with insights from John Caputo's "radical hermeneutics."

Carspecken's talk begins with a response to scientism through exploring the limits of knowledge in the physical sciences. These limits have implications for the human sciences and an intersubjectively constituted reflection. The notion of reflection in the human sciences is tied to limits to knowledge in the human sciences and these limits imply that there is something "beyond the narrative horizon," namely spirituality.

What are the limits to knowledge in the human sciences? The first limit refers to the notion that meaningful human action originates in ways that cannot be explained. As noted above, expressive acts clarify meaning both for the actor herself and others. However, Wilhelm Dilthey noted that other possible meanings are cancelled in the process. George Herbert Mead's theory of the "generalized other" asserts that the clarification of the meaning of an act to its actor occurs because human beings take the position of others and then respond to themselves as the others would. This means that the origin of meaningful acts is unknown since the act is already interpreted once it is known.

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<sup>35</sup> Phil Francis Carspecken, "What Lies Beyond the Narrative Horizon?: The Spiritual Dimension in Critical Qualitative Research " (paper presented at the 7th Advances in Qualitative Methods International Conference, Surfers Paradise, Queensland, Australia, 2006).

The next limit to knowledge in the human sciences is related to an insight from Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death*,<sup>36</sup> that is, the impossibility of not being one's self. This idea is related to the notion that every meaningful act contains an identity claim at some level of foregrounding or backgrounding as noted above. These identity claims always imply self-narratives, and these narratives create a horizon within which meaning, thought, and action always occur. There is no escaping the narrative horizon. Or, we cannot escape ourselves. This is the first form of despair Kierkegaard explained when he said that man despairs "because he cannot consume himself, cannot get rid of himself, cannot become nothing."<sup>37</sup>

The third limitation is also connected to Kierkegaardian despair. It is the impossibility of being one's self or one's self-narrative. One can neither be any self-narrative one constructs nor even be the difference between one's "I" and one's self-narrative. Again, this is a limit created by the narrative horizon. "Although anything that can be said will be ultimately within a narrative structure, the self of the one who says anything at all is claimed beyond that structure."<sup>38</sup> Also, a quotation from Habermas is instructive here:

...the subject would be misunderstood if he were taken at his word and immediately identified with his manifest actions. As the art of rendering indirect communications understandable, hermeneutics corresponds exactly to the distance that the subject must *maintain* and yet at the same time *express* between itself, as the identity of its structure in life history, and its objectivations. The penalty of not doing so is being reified by those to whom the subject addresses itself.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Søren Kierkegaard and Walter Lowrie, *The Sickness Unto Death* (Princeton,: Princeton University Press, 1941).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 151.

<sup>38</sup> Carspecken, "What Lies Beyond the Narrative Horizon?: The Spiritual Dimension in Critical Qualitative Research ".

<sup>39</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston,: Beacon Press, 1971).166.

The fourth limitation is the impossibility of knowing the Other completely and the impossibility of being known by the Other completely. Like ourselves, the Other is not always what it says and does; therefore, our claims to know the Other completely amount to imposition or oppression. Likewise, when the Other thinks it knows us completely we are at risk of oppression. There is also a slightly different way to think about not knowing the Other. Although Carspecken does not mention John Caputo, his project of “radical hermeneutics” is congruent with this particular limit to knowledge in the human sciences. Caputo “radicalizes” the hermeneutic project by “harassing” it with deconstruction.<sup>40</sup> In his first volume on this notion, Caputo badgered hermeneutics with Kierkegaard’s idea of “repetition” but in the subsequent, *More Radical Hermeneutics* (2000), he runs deconstruction together with hermeneutics by asserting the notion of the “absolute secret” or “The Secret.” Caputo then claims that there, in fact, is no absolute secret and that is The Secret. This idea is related to the primary animating notion of *More Radical Hermeneutics* that we do not know who we are and, “That, if anything, is *who we are* ...” (emphasis in original).<sup>41</sup> This implies the idea that we do not know the Other and Caputo addresses this in the context of “preparing for the coming of the other” about which he posits these questions:

How is one to prepare for the coming of the other? Is not the other, as other, the one for whom one is precisely not prepared? Does not preparation relieve the other of his or her alterity so that, if we are prepared, then what comes is not the other but the same, just what we were expecting? Would not extending true hospitality toward the other involve a certain unconditionality in which one is prepared for anything, which means that one is not prepared? Is the only adequate preparation for the coming of the other to confess that we cannot be prepared for what is coming?<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> John D. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics : On Not Knowing Who We Are, Studies in Continental Thought* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2000).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 41.



The fifth and final limit to knowledge in the human sciences is what Caputo claims is part of The Secret. That is, the impossibility of knowing one's self. No other human being can completely know us, and we can never completely know ourselves because of the impossibility of gaining a pure reflection. Self-reflection is always mediated by others, both specific and generalized.

So what is beyond this narrative horizon? Carspecken claims that the limits to knowledge in the human sciences implicate spirituality. He uses both Western and Eastern spiritual traditions to elucidate the point. Christian theologian Michael Theunissen uses Kierkegaard, Hegel, and Marx to postulate a spirituality based on intersubjectivity, emphasizing the idea of the different and unknown other (in this way, Theunissen's ideas are related to Caputo's "radical hermeneutics"). Intersubjectivity creates the possibility for authenticity since a communicative encounter with the other necessarily creates an experience of lack of control, that is, of not having control over how the other might respond. However, encountering authenticity is certainly not guaranteed since fear can often motivate its denial. Also, as noted above, power often distorts relationships.

The types of dialogic relationships include those characterized by passion in which one feels a kind of totalizing adoration for another, by negation in which one person feels threatened by another so much that the threat must be eliminated through negation of the other, by entanglement such that the self is completely dissolved into the identity of the other, or finally by mutual recognition, care, and affection. Thinking about relationships thus characterized leads to the consideration of intersubjectivity in the spiritual domain. The deepest desires in human existence are addressed only through

compassion and mutual recognition. Often this realization happens through learning (painfully) how human beings can interpersonally dominate others out of fear or desire. This path finds congruence with Theunissen's formulations.

Authenticity, for Theunissen, is the recognition of the other's difference and freedom from yourself and your difference and freedom from the other. Of course, this dialectic has been taken up by a number of thinkers before Theunissen, but he situates it within intersubjectivity. The dialectic takes two forms. One is "communicative freedom" or being-with-*oneself*-in-the-other.

The second form of the dialectic is love or being-with-*oneself*-in-the-*other*. The freedom of the other lies in its difference from one's self. Recognizing this freedom is the acknowledgement that the Other can always act in ways we cannot predict, and, like us, the Other is always beyond any particular narrative whether told by us or by the Other herself.

In Theunissen's monotheism the recognition of the freedom of the other and the implications for the self that this acknowledgement carries within the context of intersubjectivity presupposes an ultimately free other, or God. So, the kingdom of God is an intersubjective idea that "exists *between* the human beings who are called to it, as a present future."<sup>43</sup> Human beings have a spiritual longing that is related to the contradictions of the self and this longing, according to Theunissen, must be pursued by humans through efforts to love and to be authentic. Theunissen, quoted in Habermas says,

...the reality as which the between discloses itself to dialogical thinking in a theological perspective is the only side of the kingdom of God that philosophy can catch a glimpse of at all: the side not of 'grace' but of the 'will'. The will to dialogical self-becoming belongs to the striving after the kingdom of God,

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<sup>43</sup> Carspecken, "What Lies Beyond the Narrative Horizon?: The Spiritual Dimension in Critical Qualitative Research ".

whose future coming is promised in the present love of human beings for one another.<sup>44</sup>

Carspecken connects this quotation to the limits of knowledge in the human sciences. Philosophy can answer only so much. In monotheistic spiritual traditions grace is necessary and outside of that which philosophy can “catch a glimpse.” Carspecken adds, using the same prayer of Saint Augustine quoted at the opening of this chapter, that one has to be open to grace and grace is what is required in moving beyond the narrative horizon, since the spiritual longing is essentially a longing for knowledge that cannot be attained through the human sciences. As Carspecken states, the knowledge is beyond the narrative horizon because, “all communicative acts at this level contradict themselves by trapping the actor in claiming to be both author and critic of her self-narratives: a finite subject contrasted with others, and also something beyond any finiteness.”<sup>45</sup> So, this knowledge that is beyond the narrative horizon cannot be represented. That is why the prayer of Saint Augustine eventually comes to the point of speechlessness which leads to an openness to grace through a kind of “letting go” or faith in an absolute other.

Carspecken notes that Eastern traditions also run up against the contradictions of intersubjectivity. This is important because the spiritual experiences described by subjects in this study are not necessarily tied to Western religious thought and, in the case of Melek Yonin, even while his religious heritage is Judaism he specifically notes Eastern thought as informing some of his own spiritual experiences related to hip-hop aesthetics. Carspecken mentions Chan and Zen Buddhism as deconstructing representation in communication and thought as a way to reach an orientation of detached love with

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<sup>44</sup> Jürgen Habermas and Eduardo Mendieta, *Religion and Rationality : Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought*. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002).

<sup>45</sup> Carspecken, "What Lies Beyond the Narrative Horizon?: The Spiritual Dimension in Critical Qualitative Research ".

respect to the world, and this non-representational knowledge is akin to the prayer of Saint Augustine although the path to it is markedly different. It is pursuit of knowledge beyond the narrative horizon.

So, pursuing knowledge beyond the narrative horizon can come in the form of deconstruction of the self-world relation as in Eastern spiritual traditions or in the form of a relation to the very notion of the Other as in Western, monotheistic traditions. The point is that, according to the teachings of these traditions, both result in love and freedom. With this refocusing of spirituality, it is now possible to consider the experiences of the subjects of this study to see how praxis theory, identity, desire for recognition, and spirituality inform their interaction with hip-hop aesthetics.

### **Reformulated Praxis Theory, Identity, and Spirituality in Hip-Hop**

Like Willis's "lads" the hip-hop artists in this study seek to fulfill expressive needs through oppositional cultural production. While Willis implicitly reformulates praxis theory in *Learning to Labor*, here I explicitly use Carspecken's ideas about what lies underneath Willis's ethnography as a lens through which to view the self-aesthetic relation in the hip-hop artists of this study. Below I will locate the various ways in which hip-hop artists seek to fulfill expressive needs, make identity claims, measure levels of success of communicative acts (that take the form of writing hip-hop poetry/spoken word pieces or songs and performing), recognize themselves in their own communicative acts, and desire recognition from other human agents. I will also show that identity and desire for recognition are pursued in hip-hop through high levels of foregrounding and that this is related to spiritual experiences for the participants.

All of the artists in this study are full-time artists. They engage in a number of artistic and artistically related activities (including working with young amateur artists and teaching high school or college workshops in hip-hop poetry and aesthetics) but at bottom they make their living from creating and performing their art. This means that expressive needs are at the forefront of what they do vocationally. And because hip-hop for these artists is so much an expression of the personal, identity claims are made in nearly every line of a poem or rap and with almost all the gestures and movements in a performance. This is one reason why hip-hop can be so clearly recognized through the lens of reformulated praxis theory. Hip-hop itself is a kind of response to “alienation.” As noted by Melek Yonin and countless other artists, hip-hop is the voice of the forgotten experience, the marginalized voice. While certainly not all hip-hop artists have come to participate in the culture through a patent experience of “alienation,” it is still the case that the hip-hop aesthetic is animated by an insistence on being heard that is related to the concept of “alienation.” Dove Rock’s foregrounding of her status of high school dropout, her self-reported difficult childhood and teen years that have created for her a “level of fucked-upness,” Melek Yonin’s “other side of the tracks” suburban experience, his struggles with Judaism, and Idris Goodwin’s reaction to self-referencing critics and pompous art school students with their fustian talk are all suggestions that they found in hip-hop a way of opposing some manifestation of mainstream or dominant culture. Hip-hop, then, is a constant pursuit of expressive needs, a way for these artists to construct and maintain a social self and to pursue knowledge of self. In what follows I will attempt to capture these pursuits of expressive needs and the resulting spiritual experiences, and in so doing, I will rely on rather lengthy passages from interviews of the subjects of this

study. It is my intent to maintain the integrity of the ideas of the artists, and therefore it is necessary to quote them at length because many of the experiences relevant to this chapter that they articulated to me during interviews included rather long descriptions.

### **Spirituality and the Story in Front of Your Nose**

Melek's art has been significantly motivated by Gwendolyn Brooks and her suggestion that poets should "write the story in front of their nose." And hip-hop for Melek is largely about telling stories. He repeatedly told me the story of how his family points out similarities between himself and his Uncle Steven, a storywriter.<sup>46</sup> Melek's hip-hop is a telling of stories of family in which he confronts difficulties in deeply reflective ways. He tells intimate stories of his grappling with Judaism. He tells stories of local realities that often are narratives of those "forgotten" experiences. But more than anything, Melek's stories are about himself. This is mostly what he takes Brooks's phrase to mean. Melek is committed in deep ways to an animating idea in hip-hop culture that says, "represent!"<sup>47</sup> His art does this work by telling the stories that are right in front of him, and even when these stories are ostensibly about the realities of others, they are still about him, his experience, his world.<sup>48</sup>

**Melek:** I guess, hip hop, like Gwendolyn Brooks, like Nikki Giovanni, they encourage you to, I mean it's kind of this old adage, just talk about

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<sup>46</sup> This is also mentioned in Melek's piece, "family feud" that is discussed in chapter 3.

<sup>47</sup> I do not use this exclamation point here or in the title nonchalantly. As one of hip-hop's most recognized mantras it is always emphasized, often shouted when communicated verbally. It is a kind of rallying cry that, to my thinking, must be accompanied by an exclamation point in its written form.

<sup>48</sup> As an illustration of how deeply committed to the idea of "represent!" and telling the story "in front of your nose" Melek is, I had shared with him a few times my own personal struggles with a religious heritage (in the context of his wrestling with his Judaism) and he once told me that he thought that was what I should eventually write about. In fact, he thought that was "the story" I should tell.

what you know. Gwendolyn Brooks says, “write the story that’s in front of your nose,” hip hop says, “represent!” and it’s this process of self-reflection and kind of like understanding your space in the world. And then also being able to like, look into other spaces or other things and see beyond those images. So, for instance we see maybe like, abandoned factories along the lakefront on the south side [of Chicago] and so they stand, you know, perhaps just as old buildings that are rusted, but if we use a poetic imagination they speak to economic trends and postindustrialization and NAFTA and the loss of jobs, which speaks to gentrification, you know ... but if we use our poetic imagination it opens up a world. The process of writing, especially spontaneous writing, which I try to do a bit of, and freestyle especially is an ecstatic process, you know, it is like prayer because, you can lose yourself, you know. You cease to exist in some ways, like your breath mirrors the flow of your words on a page or like, just into the open air. So, especially freestyle is, or can be, a spiritual, religious practice. I mean, certainly the motion of freestyling or even listening to beats is like davening for me. Even when I recite, the recitation of my own poems, in some ways when I’m focused is like prayer.

There is much to unpack in this insightful statement of Melek’s. The pursuit of expressive needs is obviously at the forefront of Melek’s work, yet, it is also foregrounded in his way of being in the world with his insistence on viewing the world through the “poetic imagination” and “understanding [his] space in the world.” This is

also evidence of how much emphasis identity claims receive in Melek's work and way of being since "represent!" and the notion of self-reflection are being championed in ways that indicate he is making tacit claims such as, "I am the kind of person who takes the adage, 'represent!' seriously," and "I am a reflective person who employs 'poetic imagination' when I observe everyday, local realities."

In addition to the importance of expressive needs and the foregrounding of identity claims, Melek also articulates a sophisticated connection between hip-hop aesthetics and spirituality in this interview passage. Spiritual experiences are tied to a number of features of hip-hop aesthetics for Melek. Spontaneous writing and "freestyling" are both practices found within hip-hop aesthetics, and Melek draws connections between these practices and spirituality. Both activities are tied to spontaneity, spontaneous writing, obviously so. "Freestyling" is an artistic practice in hip-hop in which an MC ad-libs a rhyme (or a rap) and comes up with poetic lines on the spot, unrehearsed. This is a practice that can take many forms but is often enacted in groups called "ciphers" (which are discussed in relation to spiritual experiences below) where hip-hop artists form literal or metaphoric circles and "freestyle" in such a way that one member of the circle will pick up the rhyme or rap and continue it from wherever the previous person has left off. The connection between the cipher in hip-hop aesthetics and the desire for recognition is clear. The motivation to perform in a cipher comes from the desire to be recognized as an autonomous agent and the desire to maintain a social identity, but it also is motivation for self-knowledge. "Freestyling," especially in a cipher can meet expressive needs and offers immediate and multi-layered feedback (both physical and communicative). Goals oriented toward understanding take center stage in



the cipher and success is easily monitored through the kind of recognition that the group gives back to each individual participant. Not only that, but the cipher is also a place where the uncertainty of the self is addressed. The nature of the cipher and the art of “freestyling” necessarily mean that each actor/participant will have holistic and tacit understandings of her or his expressions prior to expressing them and only after expressing them are they able to recognize themselves (or not) in their words. All of the artists in this study have talked about participation in ciphers and “freestyling”; however, Melek Yonin and Idris Goodwin talked most explicitly in interviews about this aesthetic practice in hip-hop.

The passage above also uncovers the spiritual significance of particular practices in hip-hop for Melek such as “freestyling” as it “opens up a world” where you can “lose yourself.” It unveils the spirituality in hip-hop aesthetics that comes through repetition and recitation. Melek deems some of his aesthetic practices to be ecstatic processes. First, what does Melek mean by “losing yourself”? It seems to be somewhat related to the kind of “letting go” that St. Augustine exemplifies in his prayer quoted above. The idea can also be explored through a discussion of Habermas’s treatment of George Herbert Mead’s notion of the “I” and the “me” as discussed in chapters one and two. In Habermas’s discussion of phylogenetic and ontogenetic development, Mead’s work is most salient. It is within this context that Habermas notes Mead’s use of the “I” and the “me” that are discussed here in chapters one and two.

After the discussion of the differentiation of the “I” from the “me,” Habermas uses traces of Mead’s thought combined with that of Emile Durkheim in a section concerned with the sacred and the normative. In this section, Habermas quotes Mead

again regarding the fusing of the “I” and the “me.” “It is where the ‘I’ and the ‘me’ can in some sense fuse that there arises the peculiar sense of exaltation which belongs to the religious and patriotic attitudes in which the reaction which one calls out in others is the response which one is making himself.”<sup>49</sup> Habermas does not pursue this concept as an area of inquiry unto itself, but there seems to be something important about it that can be explored for the purposes here. First, note that the extraordinary event of fusion of the “I” and the “me” is a rather regressive moment in Mead’s description of it. The regression could be on two possible levels; a move back toward non-rationalization or a regression of the development of the self or perhaps on both levels at once. In any case, the kind of fusion of the “I” and the “me” in Mead is an extraordinary yet unfruitful moment.

However, I suggest another, more fecund path to the fusion of the “I” and the “me,” one that will suggest implications for spirituality. Mead’s suggestion about the fusion necessarily requires the religious experience (or some other kind of experience that captures Mead’s conception of the path to fusion) to involve a kind of inauthentic emotional manipulation. Such situations might include persuasive, charismatic orators, sensationalized messages, or other manipulations. This path to fusion is regressive because it opens the self to manipulative activity that can only inauthentically address expressive needs and the desire for recognition. But, perhaps there is another, more genuine route to the fusion of the “I” and the “me.” Consider a path that continually differentiates the “I” and the “me” more and more. In this heightened state of differentiation, the “I” and the “me” eventually become fused from the opposite

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 45-6.

direction.<sup>50</sup> This process involves a kind of “letting go” of the self that can lead to the most genuine form of recognition. Again, consider the prayer of St. Augustine. This is a path toward fusion of the “I” and the “me” that goes in almost the opposite direction of the fusion conceived of by Mead.

So, the kind of “letting go” that is related to a non-regressive fusion of the “I” and the “me” can be thought of as connected to Theunissen’s ideas about spirituality and opening one’s self to grace. “Letting go” also seems to be related to non-representational knowledge or knowledge of self that is beyond the narrative horizon.

But Melek’s spiritual experiences through engaging in hip-hop aesthetics are also self-described as ecstatic. This kind of experience that he reaches through recitation seems to be more tied to Eastern traditions. In fact, Melek, in a passage below, attributes part of his spiritual sensibility to Buddhism. Here there is congruence between Melek’s connection to the kind of monotheistic spirituality of Theunissen and his connection to Buddhism in that both seek non-representational knowledge of self.

### **The Spirituality of the Cipher**

As mentioned above, the location of communal “freestyling” is the cipher. Both Melek Yonin and Idris Goodwin have had spiritual experiences in ciphers. Once again, the idea of “letting go” or losing one’s self is part of the experience. Idris describes a related notion of “stepping out” of his body.

**Idris:** I have had the most profound experiences [participating in hip-hop aesthetics]. Just last weekend I was out partying and we had been

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<sup>50</sup> That is to say, opposite from the direction of the fusion in Mead’s conception of it.

drinking and everybody was having a good time and at one point I just looked at my friend and I was just like, man let's go on the back porch and just freestyle, man, let's just do something, you know what I mean, I just felt so good. It started out just me and my guy and another gentleman was playing guitar and I was spittin' and my friend was beat-boxing and we're cipherying and after awhile everybody, people would come back and just start picking up stuff and playing it and this one – the host of the party came back and I think she's from Ecuador and she came back and started spittin this, like, it sounded like a sort of Ecuadorian nursery rhyme or something, like a song, one of those songs, like a church song. If my family was in the room right now and I busted out, [sings] "Have ya got good religion?" my brother would poke his head out of his room and be like, "Certainly, Lord!" you know what I mean? And she just was bustin' that shit out but we were doing this thing together. She was like, telling me when to go and like – to me that experience is so profound because it's -- there's community building going on but there's a level of people opening themselves up to be vulnerable, you know what I mean, in that situation, it's productive, we weren't battling, we were all respectful of each other's time and whatever and it was like one of the best ciphers I've ever been in because everyone was doing something different so it was very unique and it was from an extremely real place. It wasn't because we were drunk and at a party. I swear, for the Lord, I sorta just like, stepped out of my body.

It seems that stepping out of one's body combined with vulnerability and authenticity make this experience another instance of opening to grace, the Other, and non-representational self-knowledge. Although Idris does not use the term "love" here, there is a strong sense of what Theunissen would call being-with-oneself-in-the-*other*. Melek describes a related experience in a cipher.

**Melek:** The cipher exists in multiple spaces and multiple times and then in multiple forms. It is kind of the model but then, how does it exist? So, one time I was at Brown University giving a talk and one of the women who brought me in for a long time was saying, "you gotta meet these guys. They're Jewish hip-hop kids, you'll love 'em." ... So the woman who brought me in brought me to their house and they were upstairs in this guy's room, four of them, all white Jewish hip-hop kids. I open the door and they're in a circle and they're freestyling. And they don't say hello, but I sit down. And for two hours we just go around and around and around and trade words and lines and just flow. And afterwards I felt like I knew them.

Melek also discusses "freestyling" and the cipher generally with different metaphors.

**Melek:** There are, I think, spaces to find within freestyle that you forget where you are and you forget how long you've been rhyming and in some ways you're not even sure where you're going or what you're talking about but the words just come, you know? And it seems like at its best, for me, it seems like you are really like a co-creator with the universe. The birds and the train, it's all a track and you're making music along with

the track, you know? And in a cipher when words are being passed and people are being playful, it becomes this like – it's like taffy and everyone's pulling at it and you can't get it off you, you know what I mean, and it's just this big space and you forget who is where and it's just creation, you know? I think in recitation that happens too sometimes ... you just kind of forget, you transcend that space, you know. To me sometimes, I'm speaking in that space [performance space, on stage] but I'm also speaking to and for my ancestors and for people who can't speak anymore or who wouldn't be able to be in front of that audience ... I don't know if it's a "wave" or whatever, something that you ride and that, it feels like, you're not concerned with space and time. You're just creating.

There is much to unpack here but I wish to let Melek's deep insights here stand without getting in the way of them too much. Certainly there is the notion of the uncertainty of the self when "you're not sure where you're going or what you're talking about" and there is also a tacit claim here about losing one's self in the act of creation because the primacy of creation begins to trump any individual identity claim when "you can't get it off you" and "it's just this big space." Western and Eastern ideas come together here again. There is the suggestion of having faith in an absolute other in order to become a "co-creator" with the universe and also Melek experiences the "wave" through recitation that leaves him unconcerned with space and time, and this is clearly related to Buddhism.

## Awakening and Other Spiritual Fragments

There are more spiritual notions that the artists in this study have talked about in relation to their participation in hip-hop aesthetics. First, Melek talks about an “awakening,” which is essentially an acknowledgement of the other.

**Melek:** Henry David Thoreau said that within a five mile radius of where you are there’s an infinite number of miracles and, you know, we only have to discover them. I think a lot of times we’re numbed in our culture via mass media and the education system and just, our interactions are kind of dulled. And so I think if we think about the story that’s in front of our nose and if we represent that story it means that we are awakened and if we are awakened then our senses – you know, it’s a sensory awakening. We see more. We hear more. We smell what’s around us and we begin to kind of feel the place that we walk in everyday. As we awake and as we record and as we represent we begin to see it, I think, with new eyes. And so it’s no longer just the bus stop or the *bodega* that we pass on our way there. We see the man inside whose little girl works in the back and brings him, you know, *elotes* from the cart that’s outside and we see that that man then has a story as well, you know what I mean? We just begin to kind of *see*. We begin to kind of use the poetic imagination to connect it to history. You know, the guy in the bodega, he’s Guatemalan, maybe he came here in the late 80s because he was fleeing from political persecution. I don’t know. It’s just about being *awake*. In some ways that is a meditative process because it’s easy to get on the bus and kind of

bury yourself in your own thoughts, which is good too, but to kind of be awakened while you're out in the world I think is a spiritual practice that maybe I first learned from Buddhists but certainly I think is present in many religions, Judaism. Because you're trying to connect these kind of sacred spaces and these profane spaces. And so I think if we become awake, you know, like what Henry David Thoreau I think is essentially saying is "this whole space is sacred but we don't normally see it or treat it as such" and so, I think if the MC goes out into the world and records, you know, tells the story of who's on the bus and where they come from, do you know what I mean? To me, that's an awakening process which is a spiritual practice.

This self-identified "spiritual practice" is a recognition of the other in that it is an awakening that allows Melek to *see* the other. This also implicates intersubjective tensions since both Melek and those who are a part of his awakening will always be beyond any narrative either they or Melek might construct. Once again, Western traditions are connected up with Eastern traditions as well since Melek explicitly articulates that his concept of "awakening" comes in part from Buddhism.

Idris relates another general notion that is important to the connection between hip-hop aesthetics and spirituality. It goes back to the uncertainty of the self and the way in which actors often clarify their own communicative goals only after the act.

**Idris:** ... you know it's like when I'm on stage, when I'm in community, when I'm doing what I'm able to do when I'm in ciphers, when I'm on stages, when I'm in classes, when I'm in it and it's right now and it's



happening, it feels right and it feels natural and I step outside of myself and I do and say things that even surprise me. So, I feel like that's what I'm supposed to be doing, that's what I'm good at and there's no reason why I shouldn't be able to do that. And I've sort of resigned this idea that, you know, I believe in some of those corny after-school special messages, like I think that if you are willing to take the time and patience to do it and really try to be invested in something you could possibly be – that's what it is, that's the success, so I'm already successful, you know what I mean. I may not be financially successful, but again, I'm not starving.

**KK:** And you wouldn't trade that experience on the back porch at the party for –

**Idris:** Fuck no. Cause I needed that. Cause I'm better now after that. That shit was amazing. I wish you would've been taping that. That shit was crazy, dog. It was amazing.

The emphasis Idris gives to the importance of this experience is another example of how important identity claims are in hip-hop aesthetics. In this passage, Idris's identity takes center stage with his assertions about success and “that's what I'm supposed to be doing,” but these foregrounded identity claims are juxtaposed with uncertainties of the self, another reminder that no narrative can completely capture the self.

Finally, Dove Rock, though she does not overtly describe her experiences with hip-hop aesthetics as spiritual in the ways that Melek Yonin and Idris Goodwin do, clearly operates within the same aesthetic sense that constantly foregrounds identity claims and yet is also caught up in uncertainties of the self. As mentioned above, she

continually asserts her status as a high school dropout and she often claims that her formative years have given her a level of “fucked-upness.”<sup>51</sup> She released an underground recording during the study titled *Sylvia Plath Easy Bake Oven*. The whole album is as dark as its title, and I was interested in how mortality came to be such a focus for Dove in her work.

**KK:** ... the thing that comes through on *Sylvia Plath* for me is the wrestling with mortality – there’s so much death imagery and substance even in the very title. So, talk about how that plays into your work.

**Dove:** Well, I mean, everything is perpetually dying – everything that’s alive at this very moment, you know, dying. You know, you’re the first person to really bring up that theme interestingly enough, and I don’t even know if I was aware of it when I was putting the album together, but you’re right, there’s a lot of imagery and even the title, just ... yeah ... I have been thinking about mortality a lot lately, even more so than when I was making *Sylvia Plath*. In order to address why it was a recurring theme, probably growing up where I did and certain family circumstances – I lost a lot of people – and friends at a very young age and when you’re a kid and when you’re 14 or 15 years old and you grow up with somebody and their lives end at 15, it really makes you, well it made me, very, I guess hyper-sensitive to mortality, you know what I mean, because one day they’re there and the next day they’re gone, you know? And when you’re that young it’s kind of hard to wrap your brain around it. So, I

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<sup>51</sup> After I gave Dove a copy transcript of the interview in which she made these comments, she posted a passage from the interview on her myspace.com page and titled it “A Certain Level of Fucked-upness.”

guess, I was fortunate to have those experiences because I feel like it kind of made me appreciate in some sense, you know, the time that I have but at the same time with all this shit going on there was certain levels of being borderline suicidal and this constant conflict of like, I'm so lucky that I wasn't the one who was shot in the head in the middle of the street but at the same time I'm so fucking miserable in my own life and almost feeling like I'm betraying those people who lost their lives by being unhappy in my own, you know? So that's something I still kind of struggle with not as much as I have in the past maybe five years or so, but, in the next album, I think I do address my own mortality a little bit more and I've also been thinking about different aspects of mortality other peoples' – well, mine included – but just like, the Internet, I've been trippin' out because a friend of mine – you know there's this whole "myspace" epidemic or whatever, you know, a friend of mine's friend, who was also very young – she passed away, but she was on myspace – she has a page that's still there and I'm just buggin' out on that because I'm, like, so in a way, like the Internet can be like this neoafterlife and that's just fucking crazy to me. People are leaving RIP comments and shit like that on her page and I'm just like so, dude, does she live on forever in the Internet, you know what I mean, like, when does that page – I mean it updates itself – as her birthday come around it's gonna change her age and everything.

## This Is Hip-Hop?: Conclusions

In a short introduction to Idris Goodwin's self-titled album that he released during the course of this study, Melek Yonin recorded a piece called

"Prologue" that says:

*this is hip-hop  
it is alive and well  
it is not dead  
it is thriving in your neighborhood lunchroom in the hands of culture-bandit blackbooks/syllables jumbled  
in our mouths makin' people wonder if we talk English*

*this is hip-hop  
it is alive and well  
it lives elsewhere than your radio/MTV/BET station  
It has saved a generation of kids who write and bomb and break and make beats and read books on their  
own time outside of institutional gazes 'cause they heard De La or Rakim or Big Daddy Kane or Pac or  
saw Style Wars or some gymnasium b-boy practice block party and wanted do that  
tell stories like that  
truth like that  
rep who you are/what you feel/where you come from like that*

*hip-hop is our place to exist  
the whole of ourselves in the radically egalitarian paradigmatic challenge to dominant cultural Darwinism  
--  
the cipher  
where we unwrap the multiple layers of identity and document the real life happenings of our block  
of our mind  
of our community and country from our perspective*

*this is hip-hop  
it is alive and well  
it is not dead  
it is thriving in your neighborhood lunchroom  
and some are gonna call this "underground"<sup>52</sup>*

Unfortunately media images and dominant cultural discourse on hip-hop leaves the casual observer with the idea that hip-hop does not live elsewhere. The reality that hip-hop has been co-opted by capitalism and commercialism does not change the fact that hip-hop is still being used to challenge capitalism and commercialism (and a host of other targets). And the dominant media portrayal of hip-hop as hypersexualized bodies and conspicuous consumption combined with violent and irresponsible diversion does not

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<sup>52</sup> Idris Goodwin, *Idris Goodwin* (chicago: naivete records, 2004).

change the fact that hip-hop is also the force behind a generation that “reads books outside of institutional gazes.”

Though the idea is not yet part of the popular discourse about it, hip-hop culture *is* a fruitful location for gaining philosophical insight about praxis theory, identity claims, intersubjectivity, and spirituality. I do not claim that hip-hop culture has a monopoly on these kinds of insights, but I am saying that perhaps there is no cultural location that has been so popularly maligned and misunderstood such that the kinds of insights explored in this chapter would seem completely foreign to those with only a cursory understanding of hip-hop and hip-hop culture.

For the artists in this study, hip-hop aesthetics demand that they “represent!” and in doing so, it forces them to grapple with intersubjective tensions and the uncertainty of the self. Therefore, the demand to “represent!” helps make hip-hop aesthetics a profitable site for exploring ideas that are of interest to philosophy and other reconstructive sciences. Beyond that, it provides a location for discussing the limitations for knowledge in the human sciences and points us toward what lies beyond the narrative horizon. Whether through a monotheistic idea of love and the kingdom of God or through Buddhist notions of detached love or some combination of both, exploring spirituality in hip-hop ultimately provides deep insight about knowledge and human development.

## Chapter Five

### Prophetic Pragmatist Aesthetics and the Self-Aesthetic Relation in Hip-Hop Culture

All of this is my ebonix  
I'm fishin secrets out this gin and tonic  
I sip it for a taste of sour  
I got these bitter bites for every hour  
And yes, I live inside a hazy future  
And I write a song without a song  
I got these lyrics sprawled across the wall  
and they're upside down/ and so bizarre  
  
and it's me that's normal on the right track and formal  
suits & ties is balls and chains and my tattered stuff is all the rage  
age is regression and suppression is sinful/ unload this pencil like baggages  
and the raving Raymond Babbages is geniuses we savages/ cutting creativity  
because we ugly and, yes, that's what we like/  
butcher cleavers/ bustin brilliance like balloons/ cartoons laughin at us/ while we  
try to crack our cocoons ...  
  
all of this is my Ebonix  
i wrote love letters in my comics  
Soliloquies/ and silly sonnets  
Here comes the flood of quips and comments ...

Idris Goodwin

Even as hip-hop culture begins to find more acceptance in the academy as an appropriate location for scholarly inquiry, one can still encounter plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest that the marginalization of this pursuit remains. And while it is merely *possible* to find this kind of marginalization of hip-hop on university campuses, it is all too easy to find it under attack in dominant cultural discourse. It is not at all

uncommon to find conservative (and moderate) television personalities lamenting the damage done to “our” youth and “our” culture by “rap music.” Internet message boards dedicated to any number of topics from politics to culture to sports can sometimes stumble onto discussion topics that yield a similar wag of the finger at hip-hop. To be sure, the blogosphere and the Internet in general are populated by plenty of hip-hop fans, scholars, artists, and general apologists.<sup>1</sup> Yet, mainstream rhetoric about hip-hop culture or, as it is generally reduced to, “rap music” continues to stir up a kind of moral panic that obfuscates the discourse on the subject such that parents, educators, community leaders, and others often operate with less than complete and less than accurate understandings of hip-hop. This creates problems since hip-hop as a cultural force has influenced youth culture on a massive scale. Hip-hop’s impact has come to know no race, gender, or socioeconomic boundaries. It continues to have increasing levels of influence internationally. The combination of so many young people connecting to and being influenced by hip-hop culture with the ubiquity of truncated dominant cultural discourses that demonize it results in cultural and generational disconnections that have become fertile ground for marginalization and oppression. It is not uncommon for teachers in even the most reputable schools to label students with pejorative classifications such as “thugs” or “gang-bangers” based on sartorial styles and tastes in music that are associated with hip-hop culture.<sup>2</sup> The irony is that the further marginalization of these students based on ill-informed and incomplete notions of hip-

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<sup>1</sup> Jeff Chang’s *cantstopwontstop.com* (a title that is shared with his American Book Award winning history of the hip-hop generation) is exemplary.

<sup>2</sup> Stacey J. Lee, *Up against Whiteness: Race, School, and Immigrant Youth* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2005).

hop and rap serves to fuel their demand to be heard and solidifies their position in schools as cultural producers first, much like Willis's "lads."

Marginalization and disconnection characterizes not only the relationship between hip-hop and specific institutions like schools but also, as noted above, between hip-hop culture and mainstream culture broadly. Tipper Gore and Oprah Winfrey have waged highly public battles against hip-hop's supposed injurious effects on youth. These kinds of efforts are covered extensively by mainstream media while a claim like Melek Yonin's that hip-hop "has saved a generation of kids who write and bomb and break and make beats and read books on their own time outside of institutional gazes" has largely been left out of the dominant culture's reporting on hip-hop and its influence on youth culture. Of course, the marginalization and disconnection are driven by the fact that hyper-commodified hip-hop and the kind of hip-hop that reinscribes hegemony rather than combating it is the variety that dominates major media outlets and as a result, the dominant cultural imagination. The issue is complex because most of the so-called underground hip-hop artists I encountered in the course of this study do not necessarily lament the commercial success of the hip-hop artists whose records get mainstream radio airplay and whose videos show up on MTV and BET. Mainstream success for hip-hoppers is often celebrated by so-called underground artists, but not without certain caveats and not without complicating the matter to a degree. For instance, in Melek Yonin's discussion of Diddy's financial success, he claims that Diddy's neighbors in the Hamptons are likely "nervous," and Melek thinks that "there's something really powerful in that" but at the same time, Diddy's (and other performers whose work has been hyper-commodified) music is "ultimately a song of capitalism" leading Melek to conclude that



in the end, while there is some amount of positive social impact when a young African-American man attains the kind of financial power necessary to gain access to residency in the swanky Hamptons, “I don’t care. I mean, that doesn’t mean that I have health insurance. And that doesn’t make Chicago Public Schools better because P.Diddy has a house in the Hamptons.” And, of course, mainstream media is all too eager to tell the story of Diddy’s apparent life of conspicuous consumption while hip-hop artist Melek Yonin’s life of concern for the issues in Chicago Public Schools is likely not to gain traction as news at the national level.

The marginalization and disconnection that impact the dominant culture’s view and (mis)understanding of hip-hop does damage to individual young people, youth culture in general, and hip-hop artists themselves as mainstream media continues to feed the moral panic that often surrounds hip-hop through incomplete understanding and misinformation. In a review of Russell Potter’s *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism* (1995), Brent Wood says, “Potter deftly shows how rappers’ rhetorical strategies are often misunderstood by their audience, and how ‘moral panic’ can be used as a tool of powerful interests to keep insurrectionary culture at bay.”<sup>3</sup> The result of morally panicked discourse is a mainstream cultural sensibility that often maintains baseless negative associations such as hip-hop clothing styles being connected to gangsterism and general social indecency as evidenced by the litany of anecdotal records of teachers referring to students as “thugs” or “gangbangers,” evaluations based solely on dress.<sup>4</sup> Moral panic is what causes ultra-conservative television personalities like Bill O’Reilly to constantly refer to hip-hop and rap as such alarmingly viperous

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<sup>3</sup> Brent Wood, “Resistance in Rhyme,” *Postmodern Culture* 7, no. 1 (1996).

<sup>4</sup> I once heard a white high school teacher say in a negatively sarcastic tone, “Yeah, I’d love it if my daughter dressed like that,” in response to a Missy Elliott television advertisement for the Gap!

cultural forces. Of course, O'Reilly and other likeminded commentators are not inaccurate when they locate misogyny and violence in hip-hop and find it problematic. The problem is that these kinds of shortsighted and truncated analyses fail to appreciate the complexity of hip-hop and therefore marginalize something of which they do not have a robust understanding. So, the kinds of analyses that create moral panic are something like writing a bad review of a film after only viewing the opening credits. The mainstream (conservative) talking heads who have the most alarming messages about hip-hop seem to have, at best, an extremely cursory knowledge of the culture and their conclusions are rife with misunderstanding.

There are a number of deleterious consequences associated with the marginalization of hip-hop. One of those consequences is that hip-hop has yet to be given its full due as an art form and therefore has yet to be seriously treated as a location of aesthetic inquiry.<sup>5</sup> Idris Goodwin voiced his displeasure about this reality in an interview.

**Idris:** The business, I mean you can't have it both ways and the business of rap, of selling music, of selling any product, the people who run that industry are gonna have a say in the products. But that product is not indicative of the motherfuckers who influence whatever product it is. So, if this guy comes out of his community, he's just a mere product of his community and he makes certain decisions based upon him wanting to be

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<sup>5</sup> As noted with regard to other issues surrounding hip-hop's marginalization in the mainstream, there are pockets of support for treating hip-hop aesthetics seriously. For example, Jeff Chang's forthcoming *Jeff Chang, Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2007). Also, as mentioned in chapter one, Richard Shusterman has taken hip-hop aesthetics seriously in *Richard Shusterman, Pragmatist Aesthetics : Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

a good businessman. Now he can go the Whole Foods route and be like good wholesome things for your body, but not everybody can afford that and that doesn't appeal to everybody, or you can go the McDonald's route, which is, I wanna reach a lot of people, you know what I'm saying, and so I gotta dilute it a little bit and you can judge it or not judge it, but I'm in business. But, at the same time if you love hip-hop and you love the real shit – go out and see some real motherfuckers, go see these dudes, come see us! Ten dudes on a Thursday night spitting our hearts out for 15 minutes – we only have 15 minutes to go, you know what I mean. If you really love it, come support, come out and see it. It's the art. People are forgetting the art ... if we're just talking about hip-hop and what's beautiful about hip-hop, let's talk about the art of hip-hop, let's talk about what beatmaking is and where it comes from and who's on the cutting edge of that craft, you know what I'm saying?

The short shrift that the art of hip-hop receives results in much missed opportunity to explore important aesthetic ideas and the confluence of identity and aesthetics that I have been referring to as the self-aesthetic relation. I explore those ideas here beginning with Richard Shusterman's important work in pragmatist aesthetics. Not only does Shusterman recapture and reassert Deweyan aesthetic notions in contrast to analytic philosophy of art, he also specifically deals with the marginalization of popular art and in so doing treats seriously popular culture in general and hip-hop in particular. Shusterman creates four aesthetic categories with which to examine hip-hop. Here I adopt his categories but view them through the lens of the prophetic. This results in adding to his

categories as well. “Prophetic pragmatist aesthetics,” like “pragmatist aesthetics,” leans heavily on Dewey’s *Art as Experience* and it adds to this foundation Cornel West’s notion of the prophetic that is constitutive of his “prophetic pragmatism.” Therefore, “prophetic pragmatist aesthetics” brings together Shusterman and West in a way that maintains central concepts of both while expanding Shusterman’s treatment of hip-hop aesthetics to include consideration of the prophetic and its influence on the art of hip-hop as well as the self-aesthetic relation.

As mentioned above, the artist in this study who made the most frequent and explicit calls for focusing on hip-hop aesthetics in a serious way was Idris Goodwin. He provided me with insight from a so-called underground artist’s perspective about the lack of focus on hip-hop as an aesthetic location. In interviews, he repeatedly circled back to ideas about hip-hop as an art form and the lack of discourse around this notion. While I make the claim here that hip-hop has not, with perhaps one exception<sup>6</sup> been treated as a location of aesthetic inquiry, in part, because the marginalization and demonization of hip-hop culture by mainstream media has truncated the dominant discourse on it to such an extent that it is difficult for the notion that hip-hop aesthetics is a serious location of inquiry to gain traction outside of those who participate on some level in hip-hop culture, Idris asserts the idea that the art of hip-hop should become more of a focus in the *internal* dialogues of hip-hop culture.

**Idris:** If you wanna just explore the art itself, which is the mode of expression, the way people go about making songs, the craft part – you

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<sup>6</sup> I am thinking here of Shusterman’s work. Although I also mentioned Jeff Chang’s work above, it is more journalistic than academic. In fact, Chang’s work is excellent and his writing is extremely compelling but I point out its journalistic nature here only to emphasize that my point has to do with serious treatment or lack thereof with regard to hip-hop in academia.

can just look at that part of it ... there's so much complexity to it [hip-hop] that you could look at it through a lot of different angles and through a lot of different lenses. And me, personally, I feel like one of the angles that doesn't get looked at enough and almost doesn't have value enough is purely just the art part of it. Like the choices people make, the approach, the process ... let's look at that, let's examine that.

In fact, it is precisely the aim of this chapter to examine “that” with Idris’s help and with the insights of the other artists in this study.

### **In Defense of Pop Art Aesthetics**

In *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, Richard Shusterman leads up to a chapter examining hip-hop aesthetics in a chapter that answers criticisms of popular art more broadly.<sup>7</sup> This is a natural precursor to defending the legitimacy of hip-hop as an aesthetic location and an eventual inquiry into hip-hop aesthetics. Thus, I begin with a review of Shusterman’s rebuttals to arguments against the appropriateness of applying aesthetic inquiry to popular art. My own arguments will stem from Shusterman’s but depart from them in subtle ways.

Shusterman mentions that defenses of popular art aesthetics are usually difficult to find since,

most pop culture enthusiasts don't consider the intellectual critique either relevant or powerful enough to be worthy of response. They see no need to defend their taste against the claims of alienated “uptight” intellectuals, just as they see no need to justify it by anything more than the satisfaction it gives to them and so many others.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Shusterman, “The Form and the Funk,” in *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 169-200.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 170.

Clearly Shusterman, whose interest in popular art is personal as well as academic, does not find himself in the same camp as those who feel no need to justify their appreciation of popular culture since he has dedicated a chapter of his book to defending pop art's legitimacy against highbrow academic criticisms. In another passage he claims that the "most urgent reason for defending popular art is that it provides us (even us intellectuals) with too much aesthetic satisfaction to accept its wholesale denunciation as debased, dehumanizing, and aesthetically illegitimate."<sup>9</sup> This argument might be taken to suggest that as intellectuals who favor popular art and culture, we defend its legitimacy in order to convince ourselves that our attraction to it is appropriate or to somehow legitimize our appetite for it. In fact, later in this passage Shusterman likens criticism of popular art to a kind of Platonic ascetic renunciation of the sensual attraction of the aesthetic.<sup>10</sup>

My own reasons for articulating a defense for the aesthetic treatment of popular art/culture are slightly different than Shusterman's. The most urgent reason I have to defend aesthetics of pop art for the purposes of inquiry into the self-aesthetic relation in hip-hop culture is obviously to support the legitimacy of such a study. In addition to that, defending popular art as an appropriate location of aesthetic inquiry also brings critique to bear on the marginalization of hip-hop culture discussed above. Again, truncated mainstream discourse about hip-hop not only does damage wielded through marginalization and disconnection but it also closes doors to fruitful cultural examinations. Legitimizing aesthetic treatment of popular art can be a force for opening doors of inquiry. These reasons alone might not necessitate direct responses to specific highbrow criticisms of popular art but I track Shusterman's responses to these criticisms

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

below because academic study of popular culture (like hip-hop culture in particular) is a location rife with insight of value for philosophers, ethnographers, social science researchers (in general, all participants in reconstructive science), and educators. I do not consider my personal draw to popular culture as a pursuit that necessarily needs academic defense. Like those that Shusterman mentions in the passage quoted above, I do not feel the need to justify my enjoyment of popular art in the wake of criticisms against its legitimacy. But it does seem that providing responses to the criticisms might be a place to begin a positive project of carving out academic space for the serious study of popular art and culture. The criticisms leveled against pop art can be a kind of springboard for articulating academic notions of popular art aesthetics not in a posture of defense but toward a positive program.

Before responding directly to the indictments of popular culture, Shusterman discusses the difficulties of defending pop art against its intellectual critics. I will not take up the difficulties he articulates here save one regarding the very use of the term “aesthetic.” Shusterman notes that it has been an intellectual tendency to reserve the term itself exclusively for high art “as if the very notion of a popular aesthetic were almost a contradiction in terms.”<sup>11</sup> Without question, the term “aesthetic” has historically been applied solely to high culture in academic pursuits (although there are signs that this is beginning to change as noted above). It is this kind of exclusivity that demands those who consider popular culture to be an appropriate location of serious inquiry to claim the term “aesthetic” not in a defensive manner, but in such a way that highlights the sophistication of (some) forms of popular art. Shusterman reminds us that “aesthetic” is

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 172.

a word that has already undergone some application to areas other than high culture and that “traditional aesthetic predicates such as ‘grace,’ ‘elegance,’ ‘unity,’ and ‘style’ are regularly applied to the products of popular art with no apparent equivocation.”<sup>12</sup> Not only that, but of course there is plenty of precedent for the transference of a word or phrase from one cultural domain to another. In fact, this is precisely what happens when what originated in hip-hop or street vernacular finds its way into the mainstream American lexicon with such current standards as “chill out” and “keep it real.” I highlight this particular “difficulty” that Shusterman mentions because it seems to be an appropriate place to begin the real work of establishing a positive statement about pop culture aesthetics, that is, by claiming the term.

In Shusterman’s discussion of criticisms leveled at pop art, he takes up the four groupings of charges that were organized by Herbert Gans.<sup>13</sup> The first group of arguments has to do with the commercial nature of popular art that is mass-produced for profit and aimed at passive consumers. Of course, this is ostensibly a socio-cultural critique of pop art, but Shusterman uncovers it for what it really is when he notes that the charge certainly cannot be about making profits since high art does so as well. Instead, it seems the real criticism is about the mass production of popular art that ends up “sacrificing rigorous aesthetic aims of personal artistic expression to sell out to mass taste.”<sup>14</sup> This reveals that the actual argument has to do with creativity and originality.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Herbert J. Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture : An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste*, Rev. & updated ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics : Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*.



Gans's second grouping of criticisms discussed by Shusterman are organized by the concern for pop art's "negative effects on high culture."<sup>15</sup> Again, Shusterman sees another aesthetic criticism parading as a socio-cultural one. Gans, quoted in Shusterman, interprets the charge to mean "that popular culture borrows content from high culture with the consequence of debasing it; and that, by offering economic incentives, popular culture is able to lure away potential high culture creators, thus impairing the quality of high art."<sup>16</sup>

The third group of charges against pop culture concerns the deleterious effects on its audience. There are three specific criticisms that fall under this umbrella. First, since popular culture produces only spurious gratification, it is emotionally damaging. Second, it is intellectually damaging because of its escapist content that prohibits its audience from dealing with reality. Third, it becomes culturally destructive as it diminishes the ability of people to engage in high culture.<sup>17</sup>

The last of Gans's groupings of criticisms is the pernicious effects of pop culture on society, broadly. This group includes claims such as that popular culture promotes totalitarianism through the creation of a passive audience.<sup>18</sup> All of these groupings of critiques, though Gans claims that they are socio-cultural in nature, Shusterman notes that upon further examination, they are, at bottom, aesthetic critiques.

For this reason Shusterman couches his defense of popular art/culture aesthetically. He asserts six arguments in his defense, though I will take up only the four

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 175.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

that are of most importance for the discussion of hip-hop aesthetics.<sup>19</sup> He begins by claiming that the most fundamental complaint with regard to pop culture seems to be that it does not promote *real* aesthetic satisfaction. Of course, highbrow critics of pop art cannot deny the fact that it creates pleasurable sensations for its audiences since one only has to think of the scene of a popular music concert in which the audience constantly moves with excitement and delight for hours. So, the critics, according to Shusterman have to denounce this response to pop art as *unreal* in the sense that it is “spurious and fraudulent” as opposed to the pleasure invoked by high art which is “genuine.”<sup>20</sup> These assertions might seem extreme, especially to those readers who sympathize with the notion of pop culture aesthetics, but Shusterman shows how they have gained traction in academic discourse on aesthetics through the ideas of Theodor Adorno, Clement Greenberg, Bernard Rosenberg, and Ernest van den Haag. Moreover, these ideas about genuineness move beyond the claim that the experiences provided by popular art are not aesthetically genuine, but Shusterman shows how the critics mentioned above actually claim that the experiences are not genuine at all.

In short, the claim of spuriousness, a strategy of imperious intellectualist presumption, implies that the cultural elite not only has the power to determine, against popular judgement, the limits of aesthetic legitimacy, but also the power to legislate, against empirical evidence, what can be called real experience or pleasure. Yet, how can such a radical claim be substantiated? It in fact, never is, but instead is sustained by the authority of its proponents and the virtual absence of opposition.<sup>21</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the lack of response is understandable and likely due to the fact that would-be defenders of pop art do not feel compelled to defend the satisfaction it

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<sup>19</sup> Shusterman actually makes reference to hip-hop in one of his defenses and I discuss it here. With regard to the four Shusterman arguments that will be discussed here, I will summarize them and augment them with ideas of specific concern for hip-hop culture where appropriate.

<sup>20</sup> Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics : Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

provides them to the likes of the critics mentioned above. But Shusterman takes up the argument and examines the idea of the supposed spuriousness of the pop culture experience. In attempting to make sense of this criticism, he first considers that the critics are charging that the pleasure is not real because it is not deeply felt. Of course, this does not help ease the ridiculousness of the charge. Shusterman counters with rock music's ability to be obviously deeply absorbing, but hip-hop seems to provide an even greater counterargument since it is a form of pop art that actually *thematizes* realness and genuine feeling with some of its most treasured mantras, "keepin' it real" and "are you with me?" or "do you feel me?" Shusterman next wonders if the charge of spuriousness means, for those who have leveled it, that the experiences provided by pop art are fleeting. He then quickly disposes of this argument logically by asserting that, "it is simply false to conclude the unreality of something from its ephemerality."<sup>22</sup> He adds that high art does not seem to be immune from providing experiences of fleeting pleasure. While Shusterman's arguments are appropriate and I align myself with them for any general defense of the legitimacy of popular art, my own response in the specific context of defending a particular popular art form, hip-hop, is to claim that, in fact, it does not simply provide fleeting pleasure. Hip-hop culture with its variety of artistic iterations (which are traditionally classified as "MCing," "breakin'," "DJing," and "taggin'" or "graff-taggin,'" although these "elements" as they are designated have arguably expanded since hip-hop's early days) has, on many of its members, an absorbing effect. The phrase (usually attributed to KRS-ONE), "I am hip-hop" and its massive proliferation within the culture gives witness to this. Also, the way in which hip-

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 179.

hop has become such a powerful lived text for many of its proponents, especially exemplified by the powerfully prophetic influence of Tupac Shakur on a generation, strongly suggests that hip-hop, as a popular art form, is not relegated to dispensing merely fleeting moments of satisfaction and pleasure.<sup>23</sup>

Shusterman next takes on the charge that popular culture provides no aesthetic challenge or requires no active response. “In contrast to high art, whose appreciation demands aesthetic effort and thus stimulates aesthetic activity and resultant satisfaction, popular art both induces and requires a lifeless and unrewarding passivity.”<sup>24</sup> He goes on to cite Adorno and Horkheimer who made a related claim that popular art demands no “independent thinking” from its audience. Shusterman’s answer is first to suggest that a lack of intellectual response does not render pop art aesthetically illegitimate since there are other kinds of responses (he privileges the somatic) that are equally appropriate reasons to take popular culture aesthetics seriously. Later, Shusterman quotes Adorno again and Allan Bloom in order to note “their anti-somatic animus.”<sup>25</sup> Again, Shusterman’s response is helpful for defending hip-hop as a popular art form because somatic responses are certainly at the center of hip-hop aesthetics and this will be discussed below. However, underneath this “anti-somatic” posture of high culture criticism of pop culture lies a connection to what has been referred to above as moral panic. That is to say, the emphasis on sensuality and vigorous physical responses to a popular art form is part and parcel of what is threatening to the cultural gatekeepers and

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<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, Greg Dimitriadis, *Performing Identity/Performing Culture : Hip Hop as Text, Pedagogy, and Lived Practice, Intersections in Communications and Culture ; Vol. 1* (New York: P. Lang, 2001).

<sup>24</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction : A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics : Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 186.

their stranglehold on defining legitimate art as that which evokes more “refined” responses. Shusterman introduces the term “funky” and its African etymology to discuss somatic responses to art. It comes from the Ki-Kongo and literally means, “positive sweat.”<sup>26</sup> Although Shusterman does not make the point, it can be argued that the denigration of somatic responses to popular art are influenced by a Western bias, a Eurocentric posture, and perhaps even an anti-African position on aesthetic value. This kind of bias is related to the moral panic that hip-hop has produced because even in mainstream journalistic culture, to say nothing of the staunch defenders of high art over and against pop art, there exists a bias against non-Western aesthetic notions. The necessity for moral panic is created when non-Western aesthetics are perceived as infringing upon Western conceptions of art.

The third response of Shusterman’s that I take up here stems from the previous one. That is, the answer to the criticism that popular art’s superficiality results in a failure to engage intellectually. There are two ways in which Shusterman interprets this charge against pop art and the first is “that popular art cannot deal with the deep realities and real problems of life, and therefore strives to distract us with an escapist dream world of pseudo-problems and easy, clichéd solutions.”<sup>27</sup> To this Shusterman holds up the fact that rock music historically has been a music of protest and continues to organize itself around human rights projects. As a continuation to this response, I argue that this particular criticism of popular culture once again provides a platform for an introductory discussion of hip-hop aesthetics as it is another charge that hip-hop culture, in fact, defies. That is, hip-hop, from its inception and at various turns (here I am specifically

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 184.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 185.

thinking of the advent of “gangsta rap”) has thematized “real” experience and “real” problems that are largely ignored by mainstream media and certainly by high culture. In fact, hip-hop implicitly makes the charge that participation and consumption of high culture is indeed the escapist route if one considers the kind of flight from ghetto realities and postindustrial urban depression and all the harsh realities that go along with the Black/Brown urban experience to be a form of escapism. These are American realities that are not usually addressed in high culture and, in fact, the denigration of pop art, specifically hip-hop and especially gangsta rap, can be viewed as an unwillingness to look these realities in their face and instead flee to the opera house or symphony hall where the human condition is dealt with in much more abstract and less disturbing ways.

Shusterman continues by noting an offshoot of this argument, that popular culture’s artifacts must necessarily be tailored to the comprehension of a larger audience than that of high culture. “But this, for van den Haag and other culture snobs, means tailoring them too small to encompass any real issues or significant experience.”<sup>28</sup> Of course, we know that this “wide audience” does not include van den Haag and others who dismiss pop art because they, by and large, do not understand its codes and we know, for example, that rock music has always communicated on some coded level as Shusterman notes. But hip-hop, I argue, has a much deeper connection to coded language than rock and therefore is exemplary in combating the “wide audience” argument. It could be argued that van den Haag’s notion of the smaller, more select audience of high culture actually applies to hip-hop. Hip-hop’s lexicon only reaches a “wider audience” when it is so appropriated by mainstream journalists and dominant culture conversation.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 186.

The second part of this particular response of Shusterman's deals with the charge that pop art produces such unsophisticated products that it fails to be mentally stimulating. He answers this criticism by claiming that it is predicated on a "homogenizing prejudice" that treats all popular culture as identical. He further argues that "critics typically fail to recognize the multilayered, multivocal, and nuanced meanings of popular art because they are 'turned off' from the outset and unwilling to give these works the sympathetic attention needed to tease out such complexities."<sup>29</sup> Indeed, part of the failure to recognize the sophistication in pop art has to do with unwillingness to understand it on its own terms. It is important to point out, as Shusterman does, that there is plenty of superficial pop art that should be treated as such. However, to hold up only the one-dimensional pop art creations and claim that the entire genre lacks sophistication is an indication of unwillingness to search for and understand pop culture's more complex products. What Shusterman does not address is the very nature of the term "sophisticated" which is often defined by the high culture gatekeepers themselves and carries a prodigious Western bias as mentioned above. One example of such a bias is that for "culture snobs," as Shusterman calls them, repetition is an indication of lack of sophistication, especially the kind of hyper-repetition of rhythms one finds in rap music. But repetition is not necessarily an indicator of lack of sophistication according to other sets of aesthetic sensibilities, namely non-Western ones.

The final Shusterman response I take up here is one that counters the argument that pop culture is unoriginal, monotonous and is "necessarily so because of its motives

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 188.

and methods of production.”<sup>30</sup> Shusterman elucidates this charge as asserting that creativity is stifled by technological production, that massive collaboration in pop art does damage to original expression, and that individual self-expression cannot be compatible with the goal of entertaining larger audiences. To these charges Shusterman argues that high art also employs some amount of standardization (“The sonnet’s length is just as rigidly standard as the TV sitcom’s, and neither limit precludes creativity”).<sup>31</sup> As for technology, it has assisted in the creation of new forms of popular art that demonstrate its creative power. Technology is central to hip-hop aesthetics in particular as will be discussed below. Additionally, artistic collaboration and group production themselves do not frustrate creativity, rather, popular art is subject to the kind of commodification and corporatization that can frustrate creativity. However, this is not a fault endemic to popular art itself, but rather an external pressure to be managed and, if possible, eliminated. In fact, the tension between commodified and non-commodified pop art was in the beginning and continues to be a prominent theme in hip-hop culture. An argument could be made that this tension produced the so-called underground hip-hop scene. The situation is complicated because even while underground artists are by and large committed to standards of *keepin’ it real* that commercial artists are sometimes accused of having violated (read: sold out), many underground artists try to make money for their art as a way to survive, rendering some level of compromise understandable. In the end, though, underground hip-hop artists are more likely to adhere to an orientation that is in opposition to hyper-commodification and commercialization, and these themes are often explicitly found in their work.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 189.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.



It should be clear that my own defense of popular culture as an appropriate location for aesthetic inquiry is not as much of a defense against particular arguments as it is a way of using Shusterman's responses to criticisms as a jumping off point for articulating a positive conception of the foundations of popular art and hip-hop in particular. Hip-hop aesthetics does involve the evocation of deeply felt, lasting responses that range from the highly somatic to the more intellectual. Hip-hop does deal with deep realities, forgotten realities, those realities that are too difficult or dangerous for other art forms to take up and treat seriously. Hip-hop does borrow, as all art forms do and hip-hop makes novel use of technology to create new ideas and new sounds.

### **Pragmatist Aesthetics: Dewey and Art**

Pragmatist aesthetics is Shusterman's project of recapturing Dewey's aesthetics and re-establishing his ideas (with some revision) in the wake of analytic philosophy's domination of aesthetics when Dewey's aesthetic theory waned. Shusterman makes clear that Dewey's rethinking of art was accompanied by a rethinking of the role of philosophy itself. In this way, Shusterman reads Dewey as Cornel West does. For West, philosophy means something different after Dewey (even though West claims that Dewey's project did not reach complete fruition) and by extension it is fair to say that "aesthetics" means something different after *Art as Experience* (1934) even if the change was not recognized by analytic philosophers.

Shusterman defines "pragmatist aesthetics" largely through reference to *Art as Experience*, and I begin the task of describing "prophetic pragmatist aesthetics" with Shusterman's explanation of "pragmatist aesthetics." After getting clear about that, I

inject West's prophetism into the project before discussing and amending Shusterman's categories for hip-hop aesthetics.

Deweyan aesthetics is summed up by Shusterman as "somatic naturalism."<sup>32</sup> By this he means that the aesthetic is rooted in natural needs and activities of human beings, and this for Shusterman is the first of several ways in which Dewey's aesthetic theory is in opposition to analytic philosophy. The following quotations from Dewey are instructive. First, Dewey claims that his goal is, "recovering the continuity of esthetic experience with normal processes of living,"<sup>33</sup> and later he instructs that,

Even a crude experience, if authentically an experience, is more fit to give a clue to the intrinsic nature of esthetic experience than is an object already set apart from any other mode of experience. Following this clue we can discover how the work of art develops and accentuates what is characteristically valuable in things of everyday enjoyment. The art product will then be seen to issue from the latter ...<sup>34</sup>

Analytic aesthetics, on the contrary, stands in complete opposition to the naturalization of art. Shusterman quotes analytic philosophers who take this position, but for our purposes this opposition will suffice.

Another contrast between analytic aesthetics and Deweyan aesthetics is the "Kantian notion of disinterestedness."<sup>35</sup> By this Shusterman refers to a two-pronged analytic argument that claims that beauty is solely an intrinsic value and not connected to function and that art is in fact defined by its non-instrumentality. Pragmatist aesthetics stands in staunch opposition to these notions. Dewey thought that functionality and intrinsic value were not at all mutually exclusive and that serving human needs gave art its value. He is worth quoting at length here.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>33</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York,: Minton, 1934).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 16, 17.

<sup>35</sup> Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics : Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*.

But there is no final term in appreciation of a work of art. It carries on and is, therefore, instrumental as well as final. Those who deny this fact confine the significance of "instrumental" to the process of contributing to some narrow, if not base, office of efficacy. When the fact is not given a name, they acknowledge it. Santayana speaks of being "carried by contemplation of nature to a vivid faith in the ideal." This statement applies to art as to nature, and it indicates an instrumental function exercised by a work of art. We are carried to a refreshed attitude toward the circumstances and exigencies of ordinary experience. The work, in the sense of working, of an object of art does not cease when the direct act of perception stops. It continues to operate in indirect channels. Indeed, persons who draw back at the mention of "instrumental" in connection with art often glorify art for precisely the enduring serenity, refreshment, or re-education of vision that are induced by it.<sup>36</sup>

Another contrast Shusterman notes is that unlike analytic philosophers who considered science the ideal model for human achievement, Dewey believed in "the cultural primacy and philosophical centrality of art and the aesthetic."<sup>37</sup> Dewey thought that philosophers had much to learn from examining aesthetic experience.<sup>38</sup>

...while the theory of esthetics put forth by a philosopher is incidentally a test of the capacity of its author to have the experience that is the subject-matter of his analysis, it is also much more than that. It is a test of the capacity of the system he puts forth to grasp the nature of experience itself. There is no test that so surely reveals the one-sidedness of a philosophy as its treatment of art and esthetic experience.<sup>39</sup>

Dewey also parted company with analytic aesthetic theory in his insistence on continuity that led him to challenge traditional binary notions that had long held sway in the study of aesthetics. Among those binaries challenged by Dewey are "the fine versus the applied or practical arts, the high versus the popular arts, the spatial arts versus the temporal arts, the aesthetic in contrast both to the cognitive and to the practical."<sup>40</sup> The challenging of these binaries naturally brought Dewey to combat more fundamental

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<sup>36</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*.

<sup>37</sup> Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics : Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*.

<sup>38</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 278.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics : Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*.

dualisms that inform ideas about aesthetics such as mind/body, material/ideal, thought/feeling, self/world, subject/object, means/ends.<sup>41</sup>

The final two distinctions between pragmatist and analytic aesthetics are perhaps most important to the development of “prophetic pragmatist” aesthetics. Dewey strongly opposed the sequestration of art that he famously called “the museum conception of art” and claimed that this conception was all too prevalent.

Many a person who protests against the museum conception of art, still shares the fallacy from which that conception springs. For the popular notion comes from a separation of art from the objects and scenes of ordinary experience that many theorists and critics pride themselves upon holding and even elaborating.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, while Dewey did acknowledge the importance of art’s products, he certainly privileged aesthetic process. Shusterman reminds us that this emphasis on process was another way for Dewey to attack the prevailing museum concept of art.<sup>43</sup> The privileging of process over product holds great significance for a study of hip-hop aesthetics and is another reason why pragmatism is an appropriate place to start thinking about hip-hop as an art form. The importance of this notion intensifies when the locus of inquiry is the self-aesthetic relation in hip-hop, a phrase that tacitly claims a prioritization of process over product. Not only that, but examining hip-hop aesthetics with an emphasis on process is another way to dispute claims about hip-hop culture’s damaging effects and its illegitimacy as an art form. The kind of discourse that produces moral panic with regard to hip-hop is also the kind that stems from only a cursory examination of its products. The response to these products is often shortsighted and reactionary to be sure, and the particular products that come under scrutiny are usually selected for

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 12.

<sup>43</sup> Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 26.

particular political or ideological reasons. That is to say, to examine hip-hop aesthetics as process, one in which artists and audiences are involved in aesthetic experience, necessarily means to look beyond products that contain content that is offensive to some and to take the aesthetic experience seriously. Again, the point is that pragmatist aesthetics is a philosophical vehicle that can bring this kind of pressure to bear on the reactionary critics who seek to vilify hip-hop culture.

### **Down with Dewey**

What exactly does Shusterman mean when he makes this claim that hip-hop artists are “down with Dewey”?<sup>44</sup> He means in general that the ways in which Dewey’s aesthetic notions depart from analytic philosophy’s aesthetic theory point directly toward the aesthetic sensibilities found in hip-hop. That is to say, hip-hoppers employ a pragmatist aesthetic. It means hip-hop is informed by the attack on traditional dualisms like art/science, emotion/cognition, form/content, pleasure/truth. Hip-hop also aligns itself with Dewey’s arguments against the traditional identification of art with its material objects that produces the “museum conception of art.” Perhaps most important, it means that hip-hop aesthetics are “down with” the notion that high art does not have a monopoly on aesthetic experience and that aesthetic process is privileged over product.

As noted briefly at the end of chapter one, Shusterman has created four categories for hip-hop as a means to discuss its place in pragmatist aesthetics. They are, “appropriative sampling,” “cutting and temporality,” “technology and mass-media

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 212.

culture,” and “autonomy and distance.”<sup>45</sup> The first category, sampling, Shusterman connects with the way jazz actually produced new compositions by transforming standard popular melodies. Likewise, hip-hop “borrows” from not only other musical genres but also takes sounds from a host of unlikely sources a good portion of which are nonmusical sampled sounds.<sup>46</sup> The difference however, between hip-hop and jazz in terms of appropriative sampling, is that jazz borrowed abstract musical patterns and manipulated them in various ways whereas hip-hop actually lifts complete and literal sonic units and uses technology to fit the particular sound or phrase into the rap for which it has been sampled. This could include manipulating the pitch of the original or perhaps slowing down or speeding it up to match the beat. Also, in a move that clarifies its place under the umbrella of pragmatist aesthetics, hip-hop challenges notions of originality and creativity that have long been fetishized in traditional aesthetic theory by making claims that borrowing and creativity are not at all incompatible. In pragmatist aesthetic theory, it is acknowledged that all art forms, high and popular have always borrowed one tradition from the other. Hip-hop actually makes this notion explicit.

Shusterman’s next category of “cutting and temporality” serves to challenge traditional ideas about artistic unity and integrity. Hip-hop certainly emphasizes the continuation of the artistic process. The remix is exemplary and some rap songs eventually have a litany of remixes in which the same rap is treated by a host of different producers and artists as if picking up and adding to the rhyme in a cipher. Of course, there is a staggering amount of collaboration in hip-hop that also speaks to the challenges hip-hop gives to notions of artistic integrity. Implicitly, this illustrates the Deweyan

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<sup>45</sup> Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics : Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*.

<sup>46</sup> “Sampling” refers to the process of electronically capturing any sound that can then be manipulated (usually by a keyboard or synthesizer) and assigned any pitch or rate of decay, etc.

emphasis on process over product. As mentioned in chapter one, this point is also illustrated by hip-hop's propensity toward an open concept of artistic ownership. Idris Goodwin speaks to this idea in an interview conversation about hip-hop aesthetics.

**Idris:** ... the level of collaboration is far more common in hip-hop [than other popular forms of music] ... the freeness of it ... there's not as much a regard for what's legal, I mean, who owns a sound?

Shusterman's third category of "technology and media culture" asserts that hip-hop is simultaneously dependent upon and appropriated by technology and media. Kool Herc's education in sound systems in the creation myth of hip-hop is an indication that even before rap music became hyper-commodified, this was an animating feature of the culture. Of course technology is also the force that has reified the hip-hop aesthetic and commercialized it in ways that have watered it down, some say. As a result, this tension has produced a rather vigorous internal conversation in hip-hop that has been referenced a few times in this study. There are plenty of romanticized notions of particular moments in hip-hop or its origins or that characterize underground hip-hop as the culture's purest form. But as mentioned in chapter one, there is a prevailing sentiment in hip-hop circles that an underground artist is simply another name for an artist without a record contract. Reaching many people with their music is certainly a goal of all hip-hop artists, even those in the underground and the Internet has been especially beneficial in this way. The phenomenon [myspace.com](http://myspace.com) that has been mentioned earlier is utilized by each of the artists in this study. It is a way for them to disseminate news, photos, and most importantly samples of their music without cost and with relatively little maintenance. Shusterman characterizes the relationship between hip-hop and technology as

“postmodern,” and the postmodern challenges to modern artistic conventions are prefigured by Dewey’s pragmatist aesthetics.

Shusterman’s last category of autonomy is another iteration of hip-hop’s attack on the kind of compartmentalization found in modern notions of separate cultural spheres and the autonomy of the aesthetic. As mentioned in chapter one, hip-hop culture contains a litany of artists who challenge this notion in their lives and art. KRS-ONE is such an example, but the artists in this study also embody this category. Idris Goodwin is a hip-hop artist as well as a playwright and the co-founder of an urban theater company. Dove, Idris, and Melek are all educators and have performed numerous workshops for teenagers. Melek has had much experience educating as he has also done residencies at various colleges. Additionally, throughout this study I am claiming that all three “do” philosophy through their artistic processes.

As mentioned in chapter one, Shusterman’s categories and aesthetic treatment of hip-hop is perhaps the most thorough and fair treatment the culture has received from within the academy. I have only summarized his categories because I accept them he articulates them, and I wish to focus on the addition of an aesthetic category for hip-hop before expanding his project into “prophetic pragmatist aesthetics.”

### **Kinetic Consumption: An Addition to Shusterman’s Categories**

I mentioned in chapter one that I would like to expand Shusterman’s categories and add “kinetic consumption.”<sup>47</sup> I use the term “consumption” broadly to refer to both the way the artist takes in the aesthetic process she is involved in or the participation of

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<sup>47</sup> I am tempted to call this “kineticism” but this term has other implications in art theory.



the audience witnessing a performance. I also use the term ‘consumption’ to mean that hip-hop aesthetics both demands that its art be consumed kinetically and also that hip-hop is consumed by constant energy and motion.

Hip-hop is meant to be *felt* and not just seen and/or heard. I have discussed the idea that hip-hop is animated by the mantras, “do you feel me?” and “are you with me?” and these questions are related to connection. The connection the performer is interested in having with the audience is layered. First and foremost, however, the performer is expecting kinetic participation from the audience and in hip-hop performances, the audience actually understands and accepts this as a kind of expectation. When the audience feels the performer or the performance this way, any number of physical responses ensue, most of them rhythmic and repetitive. Sometimes the kinetic response is vocal.

Kinetic consumption is related to what Shusterman refers to as a “somatic” response. However, this term is differentiated from any kind of mental response, although Shusterman is quick to point out that somatic responses and intellectual responses are not mutually exclusive. But, kinetic consumption can actually include mental responses as in the energy of the cipher, and here I turn from kinetic consumption in the audience to the experience of the artist involved in the aesthetic process. The cipher is typically an artistic space that melds energy of mind and body. That is to say, there is intellectual engagement in a cipher as the rhymes are passed around the circle and the play of words takes over, but that mental energy demands bodily energy as well. Ciphers are not typically places in which participants sit or stand still. Motion dominates these artistic spaces but it is not all physical motion. The mental/physical energy/motion

manifests itself not only in the cipher but in other artistic processes as well. Kinetic consumption means that hip-hop is driven by constant motion. Artists and performers as well as audiences are usually in constant physical motion, but freestylers are also in constant mental motion and the culture itself cannot stand still, metaphorically speaking. Idris Goodwin addressed this motion and energy in hip-hop in an interview.

**Idris:** It's about kinetic energy. It's about motion, freshness, and newness. It's about invention ... it's just electric, the energy ... it's all about *right now*, where you at right now ... new shit, slang comin' out all the time ... there's a disregard for common ideas or what's commonplace ... It's just about excitement, about being kinetic, being alive ... before people can break down all your words, they gotta feel you first. They gotta feel you before they hear you.

As an additional aesthetic category to add to Shusterman's "appropriative sampling," "cutting and temporality," "technology and mass-media culture," and "autonomy and distance," kinetic consumption also provides another pragmatist argument against passive, museum conceptions of art and the mind/body dualism.

### **Prophetic Pragmatist Aesthetics**

Cornel West's "prophetic pragmatism" is self-reported to be largely a political project. It does not deal much in aesthetics and West makes only one mention of Dewey's *Art as Experience* in his genealogy of pragmatism.<sup>48</sup> However, there are two basic reasons that make it possible to expand Shusterman's "pragmatist aesthetics" into

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<sup>48</sup> Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy : A Genealogy of Pragmatism, The Wisconsin Project on American Writers* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

“prophetic pragmatist aesthetics.” First, there is some amount of evidence that Shusterman and West read Dewey similarly, at least in the broad sense that both claim Dewey to have challenged traditional notions of philosophy. West approaches this idea in a general sense while Shusterman places it squarely in aesthetic theory. From this starting point, it seems possible to merge the two projects without damaging either because of their general point of connection with regard to Dewey.<sup>49</sup> Also, the prophetism in West’s pragmatism seems to have potential for broader application than strictly political projects. West even suggests this himself when he claimed in an interview with George Yancy in 1988 that philosophy is only one of several disciplines that has a connection to the prophetic, and he wondered aloud if art might possibly have the strongest connection.<sup>50</sup> In developing prophetic pragmatist aesthetics I am also claiming that, although there could be other applications for it, it is most congruent with hip-hop aesthetics. Additionally, although hip-hop aesthetics could be viewed through the lens of pragmatist aesthetics, my development of prophetic pragmatist aesthetics suggests that it is an even more appropriate way to approach aesthetic ideas in hip-hop.

So what, then, does the prophetic add to pragmatist aesthetics? One theme has already been discussed at length in chapter three. *Parrhesia*, or plain, frank speech is an animating feature of prophetic pragmatist aesthetics. In addition to being a political idea, *parrhesia* is an aesthetic sensibility (and in the spirit of Deweyan continuity, prophetic pragmatist aesthetics asserts the connection of art and politics) in hip-hop and therefore it

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<sup>49</sup> In my own brief personal communication with both Cornel West and Richard Shusterman, they each expressed admiration for the other’s work although neither has responded to the other. Notably, in a brief conversation in 2004 Cornel West told me that he found Shusterman’s work in pragmatism to be “indispensable.” This is another factor in my feeling comfortable combining the two projects.

<sup>50</sup> Cornel West, “On My Intellectual Vocation,” in Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books, 1999).26.

is central to prophetic pragmatist aesthetics. It relates to the hip-hop mantra, *keepin' it real*, that all three artists in this study take seriously. Their art is animated by this aesthetic notion in different ways with Dove Rock's unapologetic feminist raps that are often performed in front of almost exclusively male audiences; with Melek Yonin's politically and socially trenchant poems that level unabashed critiques at not only Mel Gibson and his controversial film, but also his own city, his own people, his own family; with Idris Goodwin's courageous, though comical, criticisms of the pretentious set of critics that, like the "cultural snobs" mentioned above simply do not "get it."

A second element that prophetic pragmatist aesthetics adds to pragmatist aesthetics is an emphasis on a sense of the tragic. For Cornel West, this is an indispensable notion for philosophy as he insists on the idea that tragedy is bound up in the human condition. He is fond of reminding audiences to whom he is speaking that the Latin for "human" is *humando*, literally, "burying." In chapter one it was noted that West's sense of the tragic is characterized by the Niebuhrian "strenuous mood" that lives within the tension between romanticism and pessimism and at the same time commits itself unwaveringly to human agency. So, the tragic sense is a way of striking a balance between unwarranted theodicy and debilitating pessimism. But what about the sense of the tragic as an aesthetic notion? Perhaps no other figure in the history of hip-hop has embodied the prophetic pragmatist tragic sense through aesthetics than Tupac Shakur. His body of work shows glimpses of an attempt to navigate between theodicy and hopelessness; and even in the days of his full embrace of "thug life" he managed to carve out a space for social and political criticism. He never stopped viewing the world through the eyes of its victims and this is a salient component of prophetic pragmatism.

In a poem titled “The Rose that Grew from Concrete,” Tupac’s ideas are congruent with prophetic pragmatism’s sense of the tragic in that human agency is the primary animating force. The rose grew from concrete “proving nature’s laws wrong.” Here the hope of the victim trumps the hopelessness of “nature’s laws.”<sup>51</sup> Another stirring example of Tupac’s sense of the tragic is found in his rap, “I Wonder if Heaven Got a Ghetto” where he asserts, “I see no changes, all I see is racist faces/Misplaced hate makes disgrace to races/We under I wonder what it take to make this one better place/let's erase the wait state.”<sup>52</sup> Here we have much more tempering of utopian impulses than in “The Rose that Grew from Concrete,” but the language is clearly not hope/less. Even while Tupac has reached a point of questioning the worth of life itself, he holds onto a belief in human agency. He still contemplates what it might take to move out of the “wait state” which suggests that human activity will be the impetus for moving beyond it into the “one better place.”

Tupac’s sense of the tragic was robust and congruent with prophetic pragmatism’s tragic sense. Additionally, for some of the artists in this study, the tragic sense informs their aesthetic sensibilities. Dove Rock’s work on *Sylvia Plath Easybake Oven* ostensibly favors pessimism but even as dark imagery dominates her raps, she still tacitly employs a sense of agency. Her work suggests that patriarchy and misogyny can be ameliorated through human agency. She also implicitly affirms agency in her songs that offer political criticism since there would be no reason to write such songs if it were not possible to change the political climate through human action.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Tupac Shakur, *The Rose That Grew from Concrete* (London: Quartet, 2000).

<sup>52</sup> 2Pac, “I Wonder if Heaven Got a Ghetto,” *R U still down? [remember me]*, Interscope Records, 1997.

<sup>53</sup> At a local show I once heard Dove explicitly working out the very tension that the prophetic pragmatist notion of the tragic deals with on stage when introducing a song about “revolution” and she paused to

Melek Yonin's aesthetic sense is also informed by a prophetic pragmatist sense of the tragic. The way he artistically navigates the tension between theodicy and pessimism has already been suggested in earlier chapters, but one of his poems especially exemplifies the sense of the tragic. In, "love letter to Chi," Melek offers a bittersweet anthem to his hometown and in so doing is neither willing to overlook harsh realities nor is he able to become completely pessimistic. He professes,

i have loved you since i first stood  
at your North Shore borders patrolled  
with suburban whispers of disimagination

i gazed longingly  
at the transit tunnels you bore  
like river channels, tentacles  
reaching into lily white  
flight pad picket fences  
where jews sold themselves  
for the price of a nose job

i fell in love with you  
on school field trips  
head out bus window  
staring at invisible neighborhood lines  
that decree where the world's refugees will sleep

i see them scattered thru Wicker Park  
Little Village and Pilsen  
spanish knotted in their tongues  
generations of families  
the orkin man in trying to genocide ...

i mean the cubs deserve a pennant like your black metropolis  
deserves paycheck and payback and institutions built in their name  
run by the children  
whose fathers you murdered while sleeping in their own beds  
whose food you poisoned during a luncheon meeting at city hall  
who you shot for trying to organize tortilla workers  
for swimming on your beaches  
or playing in your Marquette Parks

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admit that she was having internal conflict about the efficacy of the idea but then still performed the song with passion and conviction.

i love you despite your cook county holding cells  
the glass precipice of your juvenile detention centers  
glaring violet, red sunsets over the domes of the kidnapped

i love you despite your insistence on tracking and standardized tests  
despite your area 21 plan  
fuck you for lincoln park and university village

i love you because i know a Haymarket riot eats at your innards ...<sup>54</sup>

This robust tragic sense of Melek's is clear in the lines of the poem, but as hip-hop is about *feeling* the performer, the real sense of this part of prophetic pragmatist aesthetics is infused in the performance of this piece. I have seen Melek perform it a handful of times, and the most powerful was at a book release party. He performed the poem to an audience of about 75 people jammed into a loft condominium in the city. Most of the people in the room were Chicago residents, including, of course, the author and performer of the poem. The sense of the tragic was prodigiously palpable in that moment.

The last addition the prophetic makes to pragmatist aesthetics is what West refers to as an alignment with "the wretched of the earth" that he finds in W.E.B. DuBois.<sup>55</sup> I prefer to characterize this idea as a connection with and concern for "everyday people." This is a vague notion, yet it can be made a bit clearer through an examination of the aesthetic sensibilities of the participants of the study. First, if we consider Melek Yonin's ideas about "the story in front of your nose" and the "infinite amount of miracles" within a five mile radius of where you are, we can see that the hip-hop aesthetic sense leads to an examination and elucidation of the stories of people that we see everyday on the way

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<sup>54</sup> Kevin Coval, *Slingshots: A Hip-Hop Poetica* (Channahon, IL: EM Press, 2005).

<sup>55</sup> West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*.

to work, on the train, at the bus stop, and so on as opposed to the “plastic dreams” that are displayed on television.

**Melek:** Why do we tell stories? Why is hip-hop so powerful? I think it’s because it’s not the stories of, you know, these dull, deadened stories of *Friends* or *Seinfeld*. It’s the stories of real people in our neighborhoods that we know and that we see. It’s *our* stories and we connect to them, we are awakened or enlivened by them because they speak to who we are. And normally, the television, the radio doesn’t. It speaks to, like, our plastic dreams but it doesn’t speak to who we actually are in our lives, in our bodies. It speaks to plastic bodies, literally, Botoxed, salined, siliconed bodies. It doesn’t speak to our bodies.

This is an aesthetic connection with “everyday people” that resonates with the ideas of both Sly Stone and W.E.B. DuBois (and Cornel West). Each one of the artists in this study has this prophetic pragmatist aesthetic sense of aligning themselves artistically with “everyday people.” Dove Rock mentioned in an interview that she has been involved in teaching hip-hop workshops using the very idea of bringing the poetic imagination to the stories of real people, the stories “in front of your nose.” Idris Goodwin also tells such stories in his work, not only through rap music, but also his playwriting reflects this prophetic pragmatist aesthetic sensibility.

Although they have different manifestations for each artist in the study, the additional components of *parrhesia*, a prophetic sense of the tragic, and alignment with “everyday people” that turn pragmatist aesthetics into prophetic pragmatist aesthetics are evident in the hip-hop artists of this study. What is true of the *parrhesia* that was



discussed in chapter three applies to the prophetic sense of the tragic and alignment with “everyday people” as well, that is, that they are *lived* aesthetic sensibilities. In fact, this is part of why they are characterized as “prophetic pragmatist” because they embody Deweyan unity combined with West’s notion of paying mind to lives being lived, “on the ground.” For these hip-hop artists, the lines between living everyday and engaging in a particular aesthetic sense in music and poetry are blurred.

### **Conclusions/Remixes**

Whether one is convinced of the “Creation Myth” in hip-hop lore or not, there is no denying that hip-hop grew out of what Cornel West refers to as the “underside” or the “nightside of American life.” Hip-hop is the voice of those who demanded one. It is about marginalized, oppressed, and forgotten experiences. Melek Yonin told me that he once heard Cornel West say that hip-hop is the articulation of latchkey kids. Hip-hop certainly began with the Black and Brown urban experience, and this stands to reason since it is perhaps the most forgotten experience in modern America. But forgotten experiences are lived every day in America in cities, in suburbs, and in rural areas. Forgotten experiences exist across the globe in various socioeconomic situations. Hip-hop aesthetics makes an attractive offer to those living on the “underside” or living forgotten experiences. Tell your story. Represent! who you are and where you come from. Speak your piece. Your voice matters. Tell the stories of those around you. Tell the story in front of your nose. These are offers that have made hip-hop kids out of youth in America and around the globe.

The artists in this study embody the idea that William James, Cornel West, and KRS-ONE share, that is, philosophy belongs in the streets. Hip-hop artists practice philosophy (as West conceives of it) through their status as organic intellectuals and through their connection with prophetic pragmatist aesthetics. They also provide deep and important philosophical insights about the self, its creation and maintenance, identity claims, desire for recognition, praxis theory, intersubjectivity, and spiritual experiences. Moreover, these insights come in aesthetically pleasing packages of repetitious funky beats and trenchant social criticism or satiristic “floods of quips and comments” and all forms in between. And they are beautiful. They are human.

### **The Beat Goes On: Summary, Limitations, and Further Research**

In chapter one I discussed the relationship between hip-hop culture and philosophy. That connection becomes most visible when philosophy is treated as it is by Cornel West, that is to say, when it is grounded in American pragmatism’s antifoundationalism, when it takes seriously the Emersonian evasion of epistemology-centered philosophy, and when it concludes that after John Dewey to be a philosopher is to engage in cultural production and criticism. Broadly speaking, hip-hop culture from the “creation myth” to Kanye West has interacted with these themes from pragmatism but the connection between pragmatism and hip-hop is especially underscored when Shusterman’s conception of Deweyan aesthetics and West’s prophetism are considered. While it is not possible to apply a single set of tenets to or monolithically describe the prodigious entity that is hip-hop culture, it is appropriate to say that prophetic pragmatism and pragmatist aesthetics are fruitful underpinnings to employ in examining the culture.

What this study illustrates is that certain iterations of hip-hop culture do indeed connect in meaningful ways with *philosophia*, and prophetic pragmatism in particular. This is evident in the emergent body of scholarship on hip-hop culture but that scholarship has focused too much on hip-hop products and not enough on the artistic process. It has too often taken as its subjects artists who have attained commercial success and who are recognized media figures. For this reason I have applied the connection between philosophy and hip-hop to critical qualitative research of so-called underground artists. This resulted in a variety of philosophical insights including notions of prophetic voice, organic intellectualism, praxis theory, identity and spirituality, and aesthetic theory.

Certainly there are limitations to such a focused ethnographic account that tries to make sense of something as large and elusive as hip-hop culture. Though I traveled in a circle of influential and notable artists in Chicago through my interactions with my subjects Melek, Dove, and Idris, I became aware that there were other underground circles, and in a city the size of Chicago it stands to reason that more than one community of underground artists exists. And while the subjects of this study certainly talked in terms of being representative of Chicago hip-hop and even repeatedly situated themselves squarely within a larger hip-hop culture, it still must be acknowledged that these are three artists in a particular underground community in Chicago and what we have learned from their corpora, their lives, their artistic processes may not be representative of the entire community of hip-hop artists.

Therefore, there is a need to continue to explore the connection between philosophy and hip-hop with other artists in other places. As noted above, there is little scholarship that focuses both on hip-hop process and the way such process is lived, “on

the ground” with so-called underground artists. In that respect, this study is just a beginning. Not only should further study examine underground hip-hop circles in other places, but should also consider doing so with other age groups since this study dealt with three adults (read=over 21) and there are plenty of places teeming with youth underground hip-hop communities that could be explored.

Further study is also implicated through the discussion of Richard Shusterman’s pragmatist aesthetics, its relationship to hip-hop, and my attempt to expand Shusterman’s project to include the prophetic, thereby turning it into “prophetic pragmatist aesthetics.” This expansion, set in the context of the artistry of hip-hop, could be expanded into a fruitful new aesthetic theory that brings hip-hop aesthetic sensibilities together with Deweyan metaphysics (as Shusterman does) and adds the prophetic component from West’s neopragmatism. This is precisely what I have begun to do here but much more work could be done to fully develop an aesthetic theory in this direction.

More work should also be done with the insights the artists in this study provided with regard to spirituality. What we know from this study is that the underground artists studied here are conversant with notions of spirituality found in the work of Carspecken, Habermas, Caputo, and Theunissen. This conversation could be expanded in further study as the spiritual dimension continues to gain more currency in the academy broadly and in hip-hop studies specifically. Artists could provide more of this conversation between hip-hoppers and philosophers and theologians (Caputo works precisely at this intersection of philosophy and theology) and hip-hop culture generally can further inform ideas about spirituality.

In the preface I mentioned that writing about hip-hop was necessary for me because of my felt connection to Black aesthetics and my experience specifically with Black musical forms. My work going forward will continue to be informed by the *spirit* and the *soul* of Black aesthetics as I plan to continue to pursue notions of spirituality and the insight from hip-hop culture in this regard is indispensable. I recently watched the latest episode in the new season of “Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry” (Idris Goodwin actually performed one of his trademark equally comic and incisive pieces on this episode) and the raw, frank words, the vulnerability, the organic intellectualism, the aesthetic skill all jumped out at me like they have so many times before. But even more than that, I was reminded again of the love, the humanness, the spirituality with which this particular hip-hop scene is laced. And I felt something like my schoolboy self *hearing* Martin Luther King, Jr. for the first time.

## **Christopher (Kip) L. Kline, PhD**

1071 W. 15<sup>th</sup> Street, #311  
Chicago, IL 60608  
ph: 312.246.3010  
email: [clkline@indiana.edu](mailto:clkline@indiana.edu)

### **Education:**

Indiana University (Bloomington, IN), Philosophy of Education; Qualitative Inquiry minor

Ball State University (Muncie, IN), Educational Leadership, Master of Arts, 2002

Taylor University (Upland, IN), Theater and Speech Education, Bachelor of Science, 1994

### **Teaching Experience:**

*Adjunct Instructor*, Foundations of Education, Northern Illinois University, 2006-Present

*Adjunct Instructor*, Secondary Education and Educational Leadership, Lewis University, 2006-Present

*Adjunct Instructor*, Social and Cultural Foundations and Liberal Studies in Education, DePaul University, 2006-Present

*Associate Instructor*, Foundations of Education and Educational Inquiry, Indiana University, 2002-2005

*English Teacher*, Shelbyville High School (Shelbyville, IN), 2001-2002

*English Teacher*, Greenfield-Central High School (Greenfield, IN), 1999-2001

*English and Television Production Teacher*, Center Grove High School (Greenwood, IN), 1998-1999

*English Teacher*, Wayne High School (Huber Heights, OH), 1994-1995

## Related Experience:

*Director of Student Programs, Blackhawk Ministries (Ft. Wayne, IN), 1995-1998*

## University Courses Taught:

### **Undergraduate**

*Multicultural Education, Lewis University, 2006-Present*

*Philosophy and Psychology of Middle Level Education, DePaul University, 2006*

*Philosophical Issues in Education, DePaul University, 2006-Present*

*The Study of Education and the Practice of Teaching (Introduction to Foundations of Education), Indiana University, 2002-2005*

### **Graduate**

*Historical Foundations of Education, Lewis University, 2007-Present*

*Foundations of Language Minority Education, Northern Illinois University, 2006*

*Introduction to Research, Lewis University, 2006*

*Foundations of Educational Inquiry, Indiana University, 2005*

## Teaching Evaluations:

Sampling of narrative comments:

### DePaul University

*I was always excited about attending class because he made the materials interesting.*

*He was able to connect the difficult (philosophy) with the interesting (education). Great teacher!*

*Amazing. He is the best philosophy teacher and DePaul needs more professors like him.*

*He knew what he was talking about and explained difficult concepts very clearly.*

*A great instructor who was able to get the class's attention and keep them interested.*

*I consider the instructor to be knowledgeable of the material, willing to help in any way possible, and extremely creative. Overall, probably my best professor I've ever had at DePaul in three years.*

*Amazing! My favorite class so far at DePaul. Kip Kline hardly ever wrote anything on the board because he knew the material he was talking about so well.*

*Wonderful! He took dense and extremely hard reading material and made it understandable.*

*One of the best courses I've taken at DePaul.*

*I consider this to be one of the best [courses] I've had in my three years at DePaul.*

*Excellent. He is very encouraging and motivating to all students.*

*Informative, interactive, and very "modern" in the sense that it really connects educational issues with philosophy. That's why I took him again, he is awesome.*

*Made me feel comfortable and respected.*

*The best course I've ever taken.*

*The best teacher I've ever had.*

*Amazing. Professor Kline is very sociable and relates well with his students. I would take him again in a second.*

*[The course] really opened the door for me to learn and think critically.*

*He is a very smart guy who is down to earth and really tries to listen and relate to us. He is respectful and very friendly.*

### Indiana University

*He was the most influential teacher I have ever had.*

*The class and instructor were great. I learned more about education in [this class] than I have in any other classes. I really feel like taking this class has better prepared me for when I have my own classroom. The instructor made things interesting and I can tell that he really cares about what he is teaching. I hope to have more classes like this one before I graduate.*

*It became a class I never wanted to miss because I felt I was gaining a lot of insight from it.*



*This course and instructor opened my eyes to new ideas and concepts about education.*

*It's a different kind of class – I liked that it actually made me think.*

*I liked that he knew a lot about what we were talking about.*

*The instructor was very passionate about his teaching. He made being in the class interesting.*

*I was not excited about taking this course at all, but I actually ended up liking it a lot. I think that the instructor made me get involved in the classroom discussions and I liked that I got involved.*

*He was very knowledgeable and challenged our thinking.*

*The instructor really knows what he is talking about and that makes it exciting.*

*Even though the grading was tough, it pushed me to try harder and perform to my highest ability.*

*Kip is very “real” with the students. He treats us as equals. He values our opinions and really listens to us.*

*I liked the use of the Socratic Method and openness of discussions.*

*He is easy to talk to. Therefore I feel comfortable asking questions in class.*

*Out of any class I've ever taken, this class has made an impact on me. I have grown as a person from voicing my beliefs, and as a future educator with the knowledge I have gained. The instructor was always willing to help and challenge us to get us to think.*

*Kip was an amazing teacher and I was so impressed with his knowledge ... he made the atmosphere comfortable for us. I learned so much this semester from Kip. This honestly is my favorite education class and Kip has been my favorite teacher thus far.*

*Inspiring! Instructor gives encouragement and urges students to participate fully; challenges students to think critically/formulate own opinions; accepts suggestions from students; is flexible.*

*The instructor was awesome. He has become one of my all time favorite professors. He explained everything very well and made it fun and interesting. I always looked forward to class.*

*I would have to say that this has been one of the most beneficial classes that I have taken in the School of Education.*

*I was never afraid to talk, he made every student feel comfortable to express their views on any topic.*

## **Service:**

### **University**

*Program Committee, Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Conference, 2007*

*Site Coordinator, Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Conference, 2006*

*Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate, Indiana University School of Education, 2003-2004*

*Advisor to Kappa Delta Rho Fraternity, Indiana University, 2003-2004*

### **Community**

*Chinese Dragons Basketball League, Chicago, IL, helped to organize and run five-week basketball clinic for local youth, 2005*

## **Conference Presentations:**

*“Down with Dewey: Hip-Hop Culture, Pragmatist Aesthetics, and Praxis Theory in Education,” American Educational Research Association, Division G – Social Context of Education, 2007*

*“Represent!: Parrhesia and Paideia – the Pedagogy of Hip-Hop’s Spoken Word Movement,” Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society, 2005 and Canadian Society for the Study of Education, 2006*

*“Rethinking Organic Intellectualism: From Antonio Gramsci to Cornel West to Hip-Hop,” Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society, 2004*

*“Prophetic Pragmatism and Education: Teacher As Prisoner of Hope,” Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society, 2003*

## **Awards:**

*Beechler Pre-Dissertation Proposal Award, Indiana University, 2005*

## Publications:

*Forthcoming from Information Publishing (currently in editing stage)*

“Beyond Utopianism and Pessimism: Teaching ‘Prophetic Pragmatism’s’ Tragic Sense,”  
in *Unsettling Beliefs*, eds., Joshua Diem and Robert J. Helfenbein

## Memberships:

American Educational Studies Association

Philosophy of Education Society

Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society

American Educational Research Association

## References:

Phil Francis Carspecken, PhD

Luise McCarty, PhD

Barry Bull, PhD

Indiana University  
School of Education  
201 N. Rose Avenue  
Bloomington, IN 47405-1006

Najee Muhammad, EdD

Ohio University  
College of Education  
McCracken Hall  
Athens, OH 45701-2979